

*Why it pays  
to hire people  
with disabilities*

READY,  
WILLING  
& able

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# 1 Introduction

*The need to reimagine our approach to recruitment and talent development*

**THE PANDEMIC CREATED** social and economic upheaval unlike anything most Americans have experienced in their lifetime. With entire sectors of the economy shuttered, millions of Americans became unemployed or left the workforce, and our leaders warned us to prepare for an extended period of economic uncertainty. We were all forced to reconsider the fundamentals of how we work and socialize.

Thankfully, though, as our society re-opened, our economy went from one extreme to the other. Our double-digit unemployment rate was replaced with a white-hot labor market with more than 10 million job openings which outnumbered available workers by two to one.

However, amid sector-wide skills shortages and a war for talent, it showed far too many people from diverse backgrounds – and, particularly, people with a disability – have unrealized employment goals.



## ***If the traditional pipelines for talent are tapped out, what have you got to lose from trying to find a new source?***

While hiring decisions, ideally, should be based on individuals' relative skills, attributes, and experience, Americans with a disability still face many unconscious biases. They contend with systemic, organizational, structural, and environmental barriers which prevent them from getting that all-important, experience-building first job.

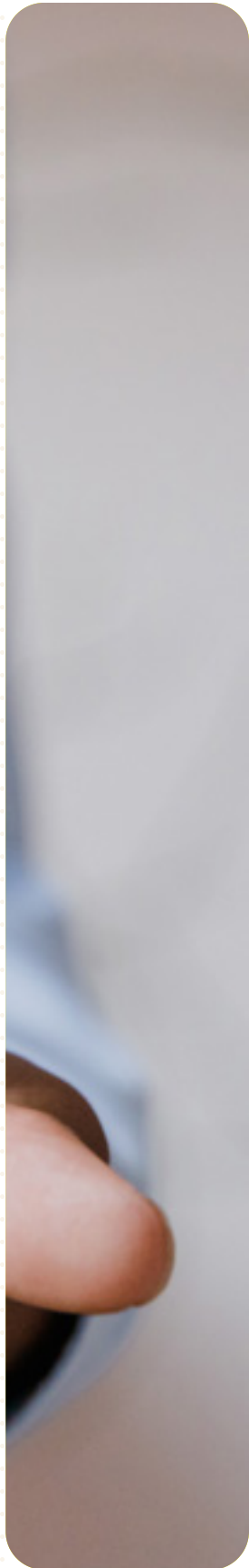
The employment gap faced by Americans with a disability is significant, persistent, and unacceptable.

These challenges are by no means easy to deal with. However, at a time of economy-wide skills shortages, we must continue to encourage employers and governments to look at new approaches to recruitment. Organizations should harness new models for skills development and employee retention to engage people with disabilities (and other underrepresented groups) in their workforce.

Bringing more Americans with a disability into the workforce must be a central plank of any cohesive strategy to expand and recalibrate the US labor force. By working together to close the skills gap, we can also expand the economy, reduce economic inequality, and ensure that America will have a resilient, adaptable, and 'job-ready' workforce in place to prolong our current boom and meet the challenges of the future.

At first, hiring people with disabilities may appear intimidating at first. However, once you recognize that your organization is not starting from scratch, and that you can take advantage of many resources, support, and services, you will become confident and re-frame the disability employment challenge as an opportunity too good to pass up!





# Words matter

At IWSI America,  
we believe words matter



**IWSI AMERICA BELIEVES** in workplace equality. This will be achieved when organizational recruitment and staffing practices elevate the unique skills, talents, goals, and aspirations of the individual. Genuine workplace equality will not let people be defined or excluded from opportunity based on their disability.

Employers hire individuals who strive to contribute their skills and abilities to advance the success of their workplace and to achieve the American Dream.

People with disabilities enrich our communities and our society and should be able to choose where they are educated or trained, where they work, and where they live.

Throughout this report, we use people-first language because we believe it is a respectful way to speak about people with disabilities.

Examples include:

- **people with disabilities**
- **people without disabilities**
- **person who has Down syndrome**
- **person who has (or has been diagnosed with) autism**
- **person who has an intellectual disability**
- **person who has a developmental disability**
- **student who receives special education services**
- **person who uses a wheelchair or a mobility chair.**

At the end of this report, you'll find a glossary that defines the range of terms associated with disability employment.



# 3 The next frontier

*Including people with disabilities in the US workforce*

**IN RECENT YEARS**, as part of the national conversation on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), we have seen companies and organizations expand their efforts to recruit, hire, and retain a more diverse workforce.

Recognizing that a commitment to DEI can markedly improve corporate culture and innovation profile, as well as widen its base of potential customers, organizations – large and small – are exploring DEI strategies to attract new employees and retain existing staff.

However, there are concerns that most companies and organizations are still overlooking the most underemployed segment of the US population – people with disabilities<sup>1</sup>.

While pandemic disruptions affected everyone, Americans with a disability experienced the largest percentage decline in labor force participation of all population groups.

***At IWSI America, we believe in the benefits and dignity of work for all Americans, including those with disabilities. Now is the time to leverage the untapped talent of a population who have been outside of our labor market.***

The social and economic reality is that we have an entire population of people who are ready, willing, and able to work.

In this report, IWSI America describes the stark employment numbers of people with disabilities in the US and some of the reasons behind these figures. We highlight examples from forward-thinking companies and organizations that are working to include people with disabilities on their staff, and the rewards they reap for doing so.

We offer guidance on how to start high-quality registered apprenticeship programs that offer opportunities for people with disabilities to develop new skills and gain career expertise.

We also make recommendations to employers and small businesses about how to advance disability employment, change

perceptions, turn inclusion into an advantage, and make a difference in both the workplace and community.

As we move towards a post-COVID era, as employers seek to navigate widespread skills shortages and to re-think workplace design, now is the time to create a more inclusive US economy – one that is based on reality, not merely part of a strategic plan.

The actions and steps we take today will shape a better and fairer future for people with disabilities. Companies of all sizes will benefit from a stronger workforce driven by a talented and diverse labor pool that results in a better bottom line.

***At IWSI America, our goal is to start an important debate about the future of disability employment in the US and assist organizations to become disability-confident employers.***





# The numbers

An opportunity to bring a new population segment into the workforce

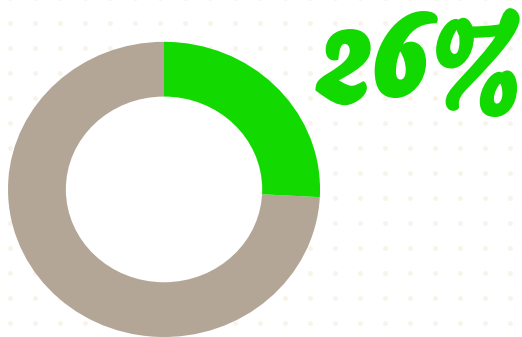
**JUST HOW BAD** is unemployment among people with disabilities?

The raw numbers underscore the size of the challenge:

- **61 million adults live with a disability in the US. That amounts to 26% or 1 in 4 adults, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)<sup>2</sup>**
- **People with disabilities are also subject to the worst pay gap in the labor market, making 66 cents for every dollar earned by people without a disability, according to the most recent US Census data.<sup>3</sup>**
- **Across all age groups and education levels, people with disabilities are much less likely to be employed than people without disabilities. As of November 2022, the employment gap between people with and without disabilities was a staggering 38%. Only 38.8% of people with disabilities were in the workforce, compared to 76.9% of people without a disability.<sup>4</sup>**

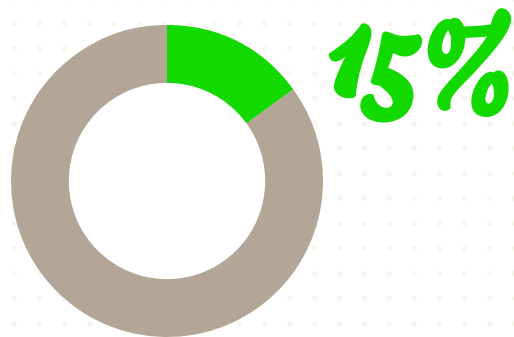
As a country, and the world's leading economy, can we afford to let the talents of more than 25 million Americans go untapped?<sup>5</sup>

## PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS LIVING WITH A DISABILITY IN THE US



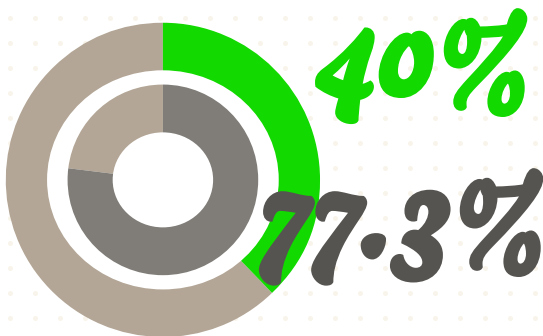
This amounts to **more than 1 in 4 adults**, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

## DISABILITY AND THE NEXT GENERATION



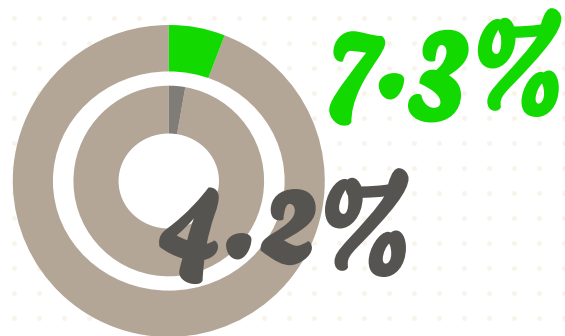
7.2 million American school students, ages 3 through 17, who will enter the work-force identify as having a physical, intellectual, or developmental disability – approximately **1 in 6 American students**.

## WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE LABOR FORCE



As of February 2023, only 40.2% of Americans with a disability – 4 in 10 – were engaged in the labor force just over half of the 77.3% labor force participation rate for Americans without a disability.<sup>6</sup>

## UNEMPLOYMENT RATE FOR PERSONS WITH A DISABILITY



As of February 2023, 7.3% of Americans with disabilities looking for work remain unemployed, compared to 4.2% unemployment rate for Americans without a disability.<sup>7</sup>

# *Diversity benefits*

*What smart employers already know*



DID YOU KNOW?

**Many major financial institutions employ people with disabilities to track and prevent international cyber-attacks.**

**The US Department of Defense employs Americans with disabilities in many training, logistics, and analytics functions, including top-secret work at the NSA.<sup>8</sup>**

**Tech giants like SAP and Microsoft employ people with autism in computer coding and product development roles.<sup>9</sup>**

#### **EMPLOYEE DIVERSITY PROVIDES NUMEROUS BENEFITS**

The easiest way to identify a successful company is to look at its commitment to disability employment and the strength of its disability engagement and employment strategies.

A 2018 Accenture report revealed, over four years, firms in the top 20 percent for workplace disability inclusion achieved 28 percent higher revenue and 30 percent higher profits than competitors.<sup>10</sup>

And a 2020 McKinsey study confirmed the greater the diversity within a company's leadership, the greater the likelihood of that organization financially outperforming its less diverse competitors.<sup>11</sup>

Smart employers, from UPS to CVS, are expanding employment opportunities for people with disabilities and engaging a broader range of talents and perspectives in key decision-making processes. These companies understand this is one of the fastest ways to guarantee superior business performance and build a defensible competitive advantage.



Diversity in workplaces has been proven to correlate with superior financial performance across a range of dimensions, including higher or improved levels of:

- **workplace productivity**
- **employee satisfaction and job commitment**
- **employee loyalty and workforce retention**
- **employee reliability and punctuality**
- **individual and collective innovation**
- **cultural inclusivity, workplace communication, and transparency**
- **company reputation and customer attitudes toward company products and brands**
- **customer diversity, loyalty, and satisfaction**
- **new product and service development**
- **market penetration**
- **engagement with the local community.**

Of course, people with disabilities are consumers themselves. The US Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) estimates that people with disabilities are the third-largest discrete market segment in the US – a segment with an income of more than \$21 billion annually. The data is clear: including people with disabilities in the workforce is one of the most cost-effective investments a business can make in their growth and profitability.

Yet, despite the obvious advantages, recent data from the Society for Human Resource Management revealed that only 13 percent of American employers have a dedicated strategy to attract, hire and retain people with disabilities.<sup>12</sup>

We need to better understand why millions of American organizations are excluding people with disabilities from the workforce. Because the longer they wait, the longer they miss out on the many benefits of greater workforce diversity.

Let's take a more in-depth look at some organizations already engaging individuals with disabilities, providing employment, and realizing the rewards of doing so.



*“Many employers simply lack visibility of and **KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HOW TO ENGAGE WITH DISABILITY COMMUNITIES** and overestimate what is needed to support workers with a disability. Every time we explain how the common barriers to disability employment can be easily addressed directly in the context of business goals, and how relatively cheap and straightforward it is to adjust recruitment and hiring processes, it’s remarkable to see the organizational turnaround.”*

**Jim Atwater**  
INRETURN STRATEGIES



# UPS

*Customer-first. People-led.  
Innovation and inclusion-  
driven*

**THE STORY OF** UPS, the world's largest package delivery company, began more than a century ago with a \$100 loan to jumpstart a tiny messenger service. Today, UPS is a multibillion-dollar global enterprise with more than 495,000 employees connecting over 220 nations and territories via highways, railways, skyways and waterways. At Worldport, in Louisville, Kentucky,

UPS not only delivers packages – it also delivers dream careers for people with disabilities.

In 2012, UPS partnered with Options Unlimited, Inc., a disability service provider in Kentucky, to build and lead a coalition of 40 disability agencies and providers that would advance new strategies to hire individuals with disabilities. The new initiative is called the Transitional Learning Center (TLC), which offers a two-week, pre-employment training program staffed and operated by UPS training supervisors and job coaches from Options Unlimited. The program combines classroom training and a simulated work environment to teach participants job responsibilities, safety procedures and soft skills, providing



participants with invaluable hands-on experience.

Without the participation of Options Unlimited, Inc. and the Coalition for Workforce Diversity, this partnership would have failed. Companies of all shapes and sizes need to recognize what they don't know. The UPS Transitional Learning Center has changed over time. It began as an HR function, but evolved outside the traditional hiring process to give employees with a disability the TLC "Secret Sauce": hands-on pre-training for a smooth, successful transition into the competitive UPS workforce culture."

**Todd Coffey** UPS TRANSITIONAL  
LEARNING CENTER

## THE UPS RETURN ON INVESTMENT

**417 of 480 TLC trainees were placed in competitive jobs at UPS, an 87% placement rate since 2012.**

**Options Unlimited, Inc., earns a \$1500 training fee from KY's Office of Vocational Rehab (OVR) for participation in the TLC, and the supporting agency receives approximately a \$1500 placement bonus for securing a competitive position at UPS.**

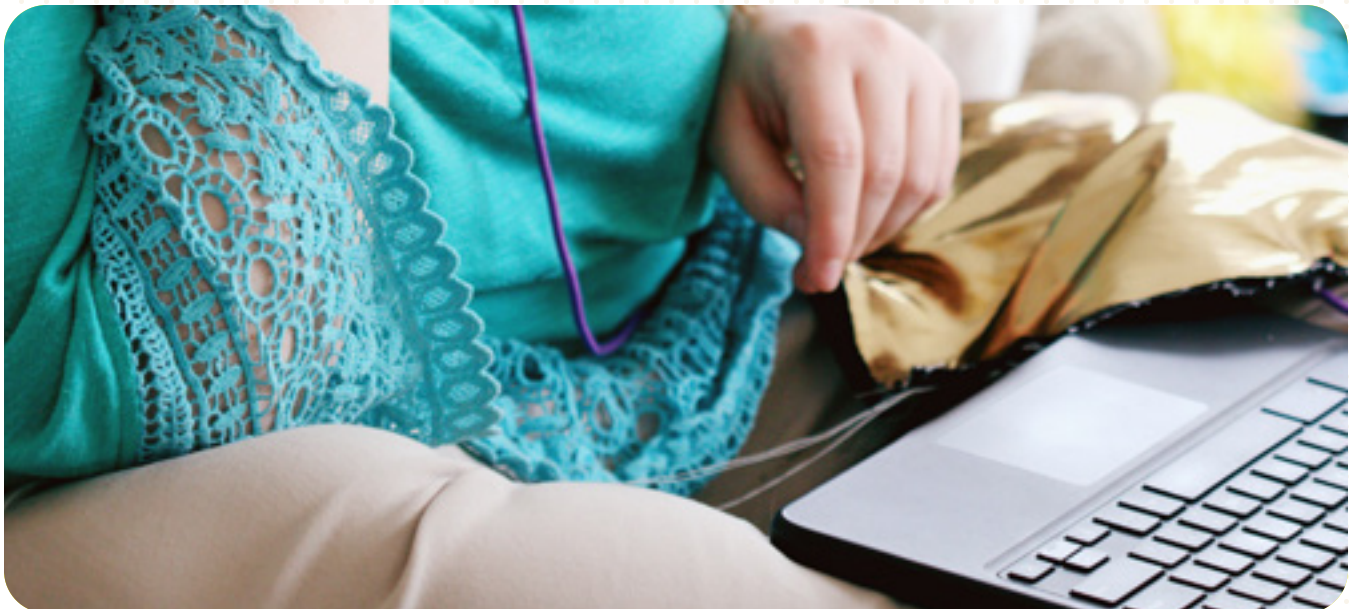
**Each year, 88–90% of TLC trainees stay on with UPS, and 51% are still employed there after 7 years.**

**15 TLC graduates have been promoted to trainers, and of these graduates, 4 have been promoted to part-time supervisors within UPS's frontline operations.**





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# ANZ Spectrum

## *People with autism excelling in financial services*

**ACROSS THE GLOBE**, people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) face significant obstacles in finding and maintaining ongoing employment, despite possessing a range of abilities and attributes typically sought by prospective employers – superior memory, mathematical and numerical skills, and the aptitude to develop structured skills at a faster rate than neurotypical people.

People with ASD experience great difficulty transitioning from school into employment. The unemployment rate for people with a form of ASD is estimated at more than 30 percent – five times the general population.

Yet these inequitable employment outcomes can be addressed through a simple reframing of the recruitment process to ensure individuals with ASD, who often struggle with structured screening and interviews processes, are not disadvantaged by their unique communication styles.

One company that has benefited significantly from restructuring its hiring processes to improve employment opportunities for neurodiverse individuals is the ANZ Banking Group, one of Australia's major banks.

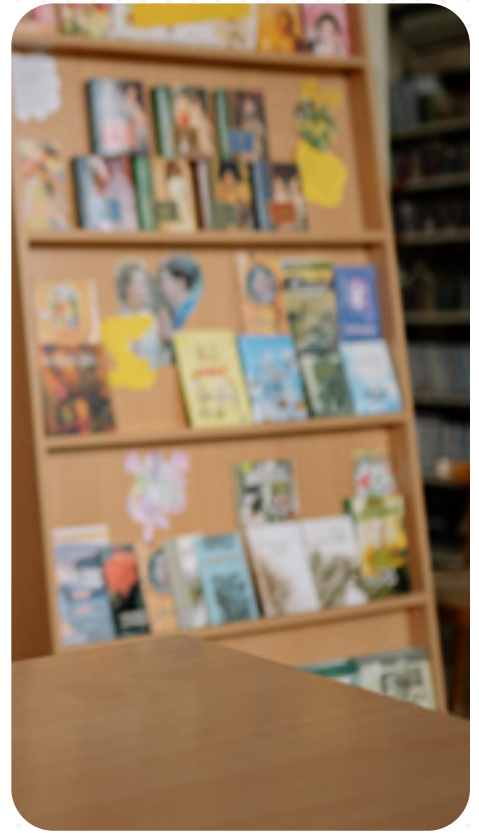
In 2018, ANZ started its Spectrum program<sup>13</sup> to bring neurodiverse perspectives into its

operations. The program tailors the recruitment process to the needs of people on the autism spectrum so they can showcase their abilities. Successful applicants receive an intensive induction into the ANZ Cybersecurity and Testing teams, and are provided with ongoing support from a dedicated Autism Spectrum Consultant to proactively address potential barriers to continued employment.

The organization has been quick to realize the positive workplace contributions and impact of people with ASD, as well as the strategic, cultural and productivity benefits of incorporating neurodiverse viewpoints into their decision-making processes.

ANZ is not the only one grasping this opportunity. A 2016 analysis by JP Morgan – whose Autism at Work program is a leader in employment for Americans with ASD – found their ASD employees were a whopping 48 percent faster and as much as 92 percent more productive than their neurotypical peers when given environmental support.

***The ANZ Spectrum program boasts an enviable 100% success rate: 100% of Spectrum participants remain in the program or have transitioned into permanent employment with ANZ Bank.***



# Blind Field Services California

*Guiding visually impaired californians on their career journey*

**UNFORTUNATELY, PEOPLE WHO** are blind, vision impaired still experience unfair treatment and potential discrimination because of their disability.

Thankfully, Jessica Hatcher and her team at the Blind Field Services (BFS) District of the California Department of Rehabilitation play an integral role in advocating for Californians who are blind or, visually impaired to identify and access life-changing employment and education opportunities.

***“Our purpose is to increase employment outcomes and enhance the independence of Californians. BFS team members pride themselves on understanding and working to address the unique barriers faced by Californians with visual impairments in achieving meaningful employment and independence,”*** says Hatcher.



**“At BFS, all our services are tailored to an individual’s strengths and abilities to develop opportunities that will allow them to reach their employment or education goals. And we ensure they can access the supports they need – training, workplace accommodation, supported employment or job placement support.”**

In pursuing this purpose, BFS offers clients a broad range of services and supports: general guidance, counseling, career exploration, employment services, independent living skills and services, assistive technology assessments and devices, low-vision evaluations, mobility assistance as well as educational and training support such as orientation, computer and software training, access to post-secondary training and education and trade or professional licensure.

Additionally, BFS also provides a variety of services and specialized programs targeted at the life-stage needs of visually-impaired people.

Ms Hatcher has more than fifteen years’ experience working in rehabilitation services. “My journey began as a generalist

Rehabilitation Counselor, and it was in this role I first began working with and learning about the uniqueness of the visually impaired community,” says Jessica, who was appointed BFS Staff Services Manager in 2016.

It is a position she cherishes. “In this role, I have a wonderful opportunity to lead, guide and mentor fantastic staff and work with true role models. I am truly blessed to work with such an amazing organization and guide an excellent team of individuals. My work, our team and our clients inspire me every day.”

Not content to rest on her laurels, Hatcher is looking to expand the impact of the BFS team. “What I find exciting is the new opportunities we have to provide services to younger people to ensure, once they graduate from high school, they don’t fall through the gaps in the community.”





# *Skilling up our youth*

*How apprenticeship can help  
young people with disabilities  
enter the workforce*

**YOUNG INDIVIDUALS WITH** a disability will continue to demand that the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) fulfills its purpose.

Among the promises of the ADA is the right to participate fully in the workforce. Schools can help prepare students with disabilities for work through vocational education and school-to-work transition services. But those students also need direct work experience and engagement with employers early on in their life course.

A structured apprenticeship is one of the best ways to obtain that experience and can work particularly well for young people with disabilities.

**REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS:  
COULD THIS BE THE SOLUTION TO AMERICA'S  
DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT GAP?**

Could the humble and resilient apprenticeship be the skills development model to help employers successfully integrate more Americans with disabilities into their workforce?

Many global employers, from Adidas to Volkswagen, rely on apprenticeship programs to both meet their workforce skills needs and provide a pipeline of diversified talent. Apprenticeship programs equip young people with the general and workplace-specific skills required to prosper in their chosen profession. While the apprenticeship is the cornerstone of skills training and workforce entry in many major economies around the world, it is underutilized and underappreciated by American employers.

***“Employment is at the center of adulthood, and something we spend over half of our waking life doing. Thus, preparation for a career, no matter who you are, must begin with a solid, inclusive educational foundation and the development of skills to allow any individual to achieve their American dream.”***

**Dr. Deborah Williamson**  
IWSI AMERICA

What is an apprenticeship? It is a structured employment program set out in an agreement between an apprentice and employer where the apprentice is paid while they learn on the job (“earn while you learn”). The enduring value of an apprenticeship is its fusion of on-the-job learning and formal technical instruction, which provides ongoing opportunities to develop and refine skills through workplace exposure and practice.

Participants who complete an apprenticeship obtain a national, industry-recognized qualification with none of the debt they might have incurred pursuing a university degree. They are often offered full-time jobs with the company that sponsored their apprenticeship, and their pay rises with increasing skill and experience.

Apprenticeship programs can transform integrated employment opportunities for young people with disabilities. The reason they work so well for people with disabilities is they’re adaptable. Apprenticeships are modular and sequential. They can be highly responsive to individual needs and learning styles, which helps people with learning or developmental disabilities better master the required skills.

European data indicate that employers who have people with disabilities in their workforce are 40 percent more likely to establish targeted apprenticeship programs. These help to provide workforce entry pathways for school leavers with disabilities to get that all-important first job. It’s time American employers understood the great benefits of apprenticeship for building an inclusive workforce.

## **WHY REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP?**

Apprenticeships provide businesses with a low-risk, cost-effective workforce development strategy that can be adapted to address local and organization-wide skills shortages.

Apprenticeships also enable businesses to

- **Offer role-specific training with clear pathways to qualification/ accreditation**
- **Build a culture of learning and development**
- **Enjoy higher staff retention and morale**
- **Bring fresh perspectives and new ideas into the business**
- **Promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace**
- **Reduce the time lag of the skills gap**

Instead of spending tens of thousands of dollars trying to attract skilled, qualified people, why not cut the risk and develop an apprentice program to meet the specific skills and workforce needs of your organization?

## REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP: MYTHS VS REALITY

### MYTHS

### REALITY

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**Apprenticeships are for manual jobs in traditional trades**

Digital, tech, and professional services companies such as Facebook, Google and Goldman Sachs are expanding apprenticeship programs.

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**Apprenticeships are for 'non-academic' people**

Apprenticeships appeal to multiple learning styles, and offer a cost-effective alternative to a qualification and a career, with no student debt burden and a competitive living wage

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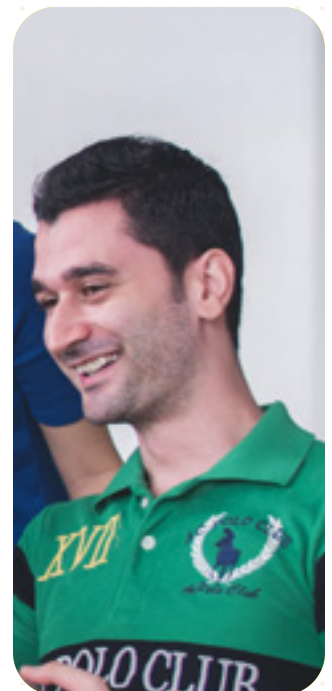
**Apprenticeships are for low-paid careers**

Registered apprenticeships, increasingly, are expanding into new-economy industries: digital and cyber, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy generation and transmission. The average annual salary of a completed apprentice is \$77,000 in the first year – more than the US average median salary of \$54,132!

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**Apprenticeships are costly to manage for employers**

Each dollar spent by organizations on apprenticeships returns \$1.47<sup>14</sup> in increased productivity and innovations







# Rethinking recruitment

*Recruitment, retention, and rewards  
for a more inclusive workplace*

- ***Do you see people with disabilities as part of our society?***
- ***Do you see people with disabilities as part of your organization?***
- ***How does your organization measure value?***
- ***How do you scale that value?***

The path to include people with disabilities within your workforce is simple and must start with your organization's mission, purpose, and bottom line.

Organizations must establish strategies inside and outside DEI platforms to scale job opportunities for people with disabilities. These include consumer products and goods and services, marketing departments, HR and hiring managers, and accounting and finance departments.

Savvy employers consistently push to maximize growth, profitability, and value, so that's a good starting point when it comes to scaling career opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

We have outlined concrete actions you can take in three areas – recruitment, retention, and reward – that will help you attract and retain people with disabilities.

## **RETHINKING RECRUITMENT**

Recruitment should be a company's first outreach to the millions of individuals with disabilities who are ready, willing, and able to work. But it's often the case that a company's recruitment process can unintentionally screen out people with disabilities. Often, websites and technology platforms are inaccessible, local job networks do not include people with disabilities, and intern slots and apprenticeships are closed to them.

Here are some steps you can take to alleviate those problems and open your talent pool:

- *Maintain an accessible website that meets the standards of the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 AA.*
- *Adopt company-wide Universal Design (UD) practices that start with recruitment. Remember that access goes beyond making sure people can use physical accommodations; it also applies to websites, digital tools, and job postings.*

Use accessible technology platforms where candidates with disabilities, local service organizations, and local and national disability groups can meet to promote job opportunities.

- ***Open a dialogue with school districts and local high schools to align skilled labor needs with educational experience and outcomes at the local level, similar to the UPS model.***
- ***Build relationships and partner with regional or local college and university programs designed to support students with disabilities by getting them career-ready (such as Think College<sup>15</sup> organizations).***
- ***Partner with disability-related organizations at national, regional, and local levels to create relationships with local talent and skilled labor.***
- ***Include people with disabilities in DEI recruitment strategies, goals, and measurements.***
- ***Establish apprenticeship, mentoring, and summer internship programs that give individuals with disabilities job training and experience.***

Modern recruitment tools and processes are increasingly automated and can unintentionally screen out people with disabilities. Yet this automated recruitment technology can just as easily be repurposed to enable employers to explicitly market job vacancies to people with disabilities – affirmative action for a different population. In fact, the software to do so has already been developed.

InReturn Strategies is one of the many companies using cloud-based software to help companies execute a 'disability agnostic' recruitment process. This ensures people with disabilities are not excluded from the recruitment process and that candidates can easily connect with employers.

It's time for companies to rethink the traditional hiring process, and adopt simple strategies like these to attract candidates with disabilities.

## RETHINKING RETENTION

Organizations can also make it easier for employees with disabilities to stay in a job and thrive. Proven strategies include training, from the C-suite to the mailroom, workplace accommodations that ensure employees with disabilities can perform necessary job tasks, and ongoing support from mentors, coaches, supervisors, and co-workers.

We have outlined a continuum of strategies that help organizations keep employees with disabilities on the job and ensure the proper supports are built into the workplace:

### *How do you win the war for talent?*

Competing for employees on wages alone is a zero-sum game. Apart from creating a bidding war, employees motivated primarily by money are likely to jump for a better offer. So, how can your organization win the war for talent? What do jobseekers want in a candidate's market?

- *People want to work for employers that can offer a career development pathway that is personalized as well as mentally and financially rewarding*
- *People want to work for employers who view employee training and development as an investment, not a cost*

Thankfully, there is a skills development model which provides people with both: the Registered Apprenticeship.

## ORGANIZATION-WIDE

- *Develop an organizational disability employment strategy*
- *Review and improve recruitment processes and practices for inclusivity*
- *Identify necessary operational supports*
- *Create customized workplace accommodations for individual employees, and develop a company-wide policy*

## COMPREHENSIVE TRAINING

- *Develop an inclusive employee onboarding program*
- *Develop and deploy regular inclusion training*
- *Create disability awareness and employment training*

## INDIVIDUAL SUPPORTS

- *Ensure flexible work arrangements*
- *Create ongoing skill, leadership, and career development programs*
- *Ensure access to accelerated promotional pathways*
- *Adopt a formal mentoring and job coaching system*

Organizations that are most successful in retaining employees with disabilities develop and continually review these strategies. But it is important to take that first step and embed this in your organization's mission. This will help you start down a path that will benefit all employees.

## RETHINKING REWARD

Recruiting and retaining employees with disabilities are the first two challenges to creating a DEI workplace. The third is providing the same level of compensation and benefits as received by other employees. But providing equivalent compensation can pose a challenge because current federal law limits the income people with disabilities can earn before they start to lose vital benefits and services.

**“Mentorship and coaching are the most common factors in the successful retention of employees with disabilities. Mentors play many roles, including teacher, advisor, confidant, and motivator.**

**Job coaches also play an invaluable role in helping new employees build constructive workplace relationships and habits, set goals and take advantage of development opportunities.**

**Deployed together, mentors and coaches are a cost-effective way to help employees with disabilities thrive on the job and stay in the job.”**

**Dr. Stephen Hamilton**  
CORNELL UNIVERSITY,  
PROFESSOR EMERITUS

Until public policy catches up to the DEI progress in the business sector, employers need to be creative with strategies that equitably reward employees with disabilities.

These strategies include:

- *Offering employees with disabilities the option to access the same benefits package (healthcare and retirement) as other employees, and allowing them to choose between a traditional benefits package or public benefits (for example, Medicaid or Social Security)*
- *Being flexible with employees who receive public benefits by working with them to adjust hours, so they don't lose federal and state assistance*
- *Encouraging employees with disabilities, their family members, and caregivers to use ABLE Accounts to save resources without jeopardizing access to disability support services and benefits.*

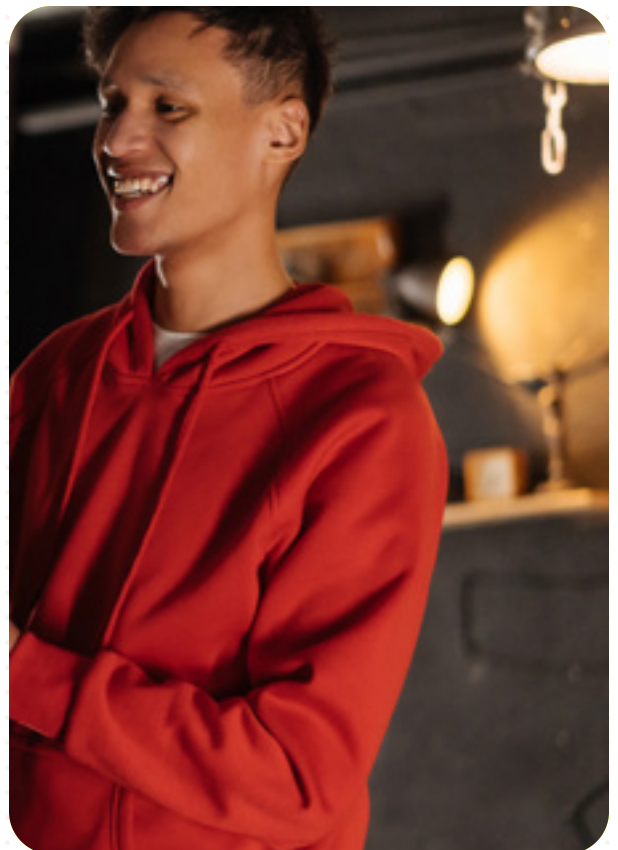


# Can virtual reality help us solve the training gap?

# 11

**IN ADDITION TO** the significant skills gap the nation is currently experiencing, we are only now beginning to fully understand the scale of a related challenge – the training gap.

As organizations scramble to find candidates to fill their available roles, the rapid pace of technological advancements is transforming the very nature of those roles.



The expanded use of artificial intelligence, virtual reality (VR), advanced analytics, cyber, automation, and robotics technologies, among others, will fundamentally transform the structure and operations of many industries.

This will give rise to economy-wide workforce reskilling and upskilling challenges on a scale not previously seen in the United States (and all advanced economies). In 2020, the World Economic Forum estimated that, due to adopting new technologies within their jobs, 50 percent of all employees will need reskilling by 2025.<sup>16</sup>

Given the size of the skills gap and training deficits we presently experience, employers and governments must consider the question: Do we have the investment, capacity, and infrastructure across our education and training sector to meet the coming reskilling and upskilling challenges?

While technology may be the cause of the training gap, it can also provide the solution.

VR technology, which uses computer-aided stimuli to create an immersive experience and has long been associated with video games and entertainment, is being used as an invaluable training and simulation tool. The technology unlocks new ways to prepare learners and workers from all backgrounds for their careers.

VR's ability to transport a learner to a complex scenario without them ever leaving the classroom means it's especially

valuable to safely train workers to manage and, potentially, avoid, otherwise dangerous tasks and situations, for example, chemical handling, firefighting, military operations, and electrical work.

One training college harnessing the potential of VR training is Alabama's LBW Community College. They're using VR to help special-needs students develop workforce skills to bridge the gap to finding a career. The Alabama RISE (Re-emerging Ideas for Successful Employment) program allows these students to participate in VR simulations to develop critical on-the-job experience before even being hired. This helps prepare them for local in-demand roles such as with logistics companies.

The technology for LBW's initiative is supplied by TRANSFR VR, a company devoted to using VR to prepare students from a variety of backgrounds for their future careers. TRANSFR VR has also teamed up with schools across Alabama and West Virginia, providing ninth graders with a VR peek into several career paths. Students are using VR to explore potential careers in the automotive, hospitality, public safety, and medical industries.

The initiatives of the Yellowhammer and Mountain states should serve as an example for other states about how to use VR training for would-be employees and reskill and upskill existing staff. We'll be seeing a lot more of this training technology across the country in the years to come.



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## *Ready, Willing and ABLE in California*

*Launched in May 2022, the **Ready, Willing and ABLE** disability employment initiative, a partnership between the California Department of Rehabilitation and IWSI America, represents a new approach to creating long-term employment opportunities for Californians with a disability.*

**READY, WILLING AND ABLE** leverages the unique features of the mentored apprenticeship model to support Californians with a disability to prepare for, start and maintain ongoing employment.

It's an approach that's already paying off. The program has already helped Californians with disabilities to access apprenticeship pathways and successfully secure exciting full-time career opportunities. It is also providing Californian employers with a blueprint on how to use apprenticeships to bridge the disability employment gap and expand the diversity and skills profile of their labor force.





**Ready, Willing and Able** provides a multitude of benefits for participating individuals with a disability, including access to a competitive wage from day one, ongoing personal case-management support and workplace mentoring, a structured training plan with a clear pathway to a nationally recognized qualification or associate degree, and ongoing employment opportunities after completing the registered apprenticeship.

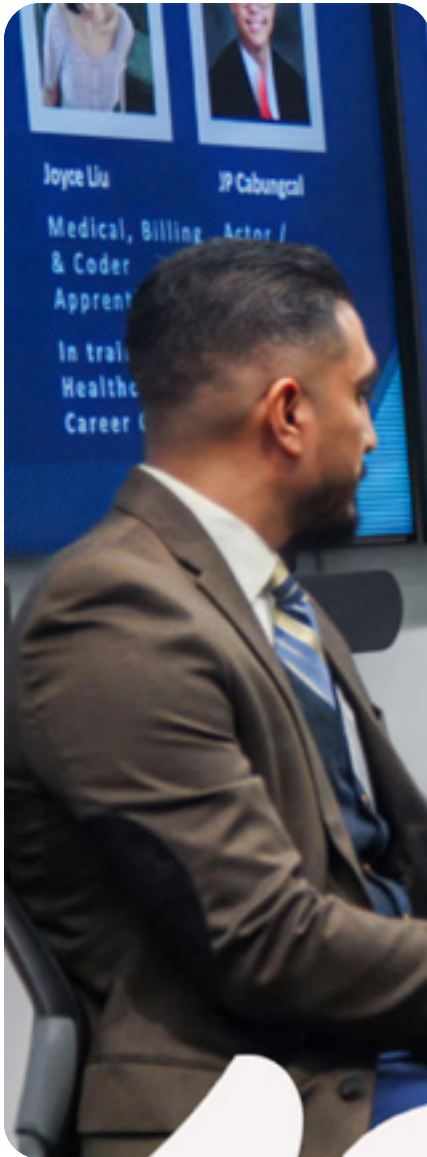
While the initiative is currently focused on creating registered apprentice employment opportunities within the allied health sector in Orange County, support from employers,

disability support service providers, and community groups is likely to result in the program expanding its scope of services in the coming years.

**Ready, Willing and Able** has already successfully placed many Californians with a disability into rewarding, ongoing employment in allied healthcare, clerical and manufacturing occupations. They work with employers, including CVS, West Los Angeles College, Healthcare Career College, and the Uniquely Abled Academy.

The program continues to seek more employer partners to create long-term employment opportunities for Californians with a disability. For more information on how your organization can get involved, visit [www.readywillingable.us](http://www.readywillingable.us)





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## *Joyce's Story*

*Performance through  
perseverance*

**THREE YEARS AGO**, Joyce Liu's life was at a crossroads.

Joyce was born with cerebral palsy, which limits her physical mobility and requires her to use leg braces, walkers and wheelchairs for basic movements and many other day-to-day activities most of us take for granted.

After completing her schooling, without a job and unsure of her career options, Joyce spent her days mostly housebound, save for occasional excursions.

However, that was not to be Joyce's life or her story. With the support of her foster mother, Kiki, Joyce set about building her physical fitness and mobility. And as her physical and mental strength grew, so too did her desire for a rewarding career.

Through the **Ready, Willing and ABLE** program, Joyce applied for and secured a Medical Billing and Coder Apprenticeship in partnership with Paramount, Los Angeles based Healthcare Career College.

Joyce is loving the challenge of learning and is determined to make the most of her apprenticeship. "I'm so thankful for the opportunity."

Upon completion of her apprenticeship, Joyce will have a nationally recognized qualification and a ticket to join an essential industry. And given medical billers and coders are one of the fastest-growing professions in California and nationwide, her qualification could be the start of a long-term career journey.

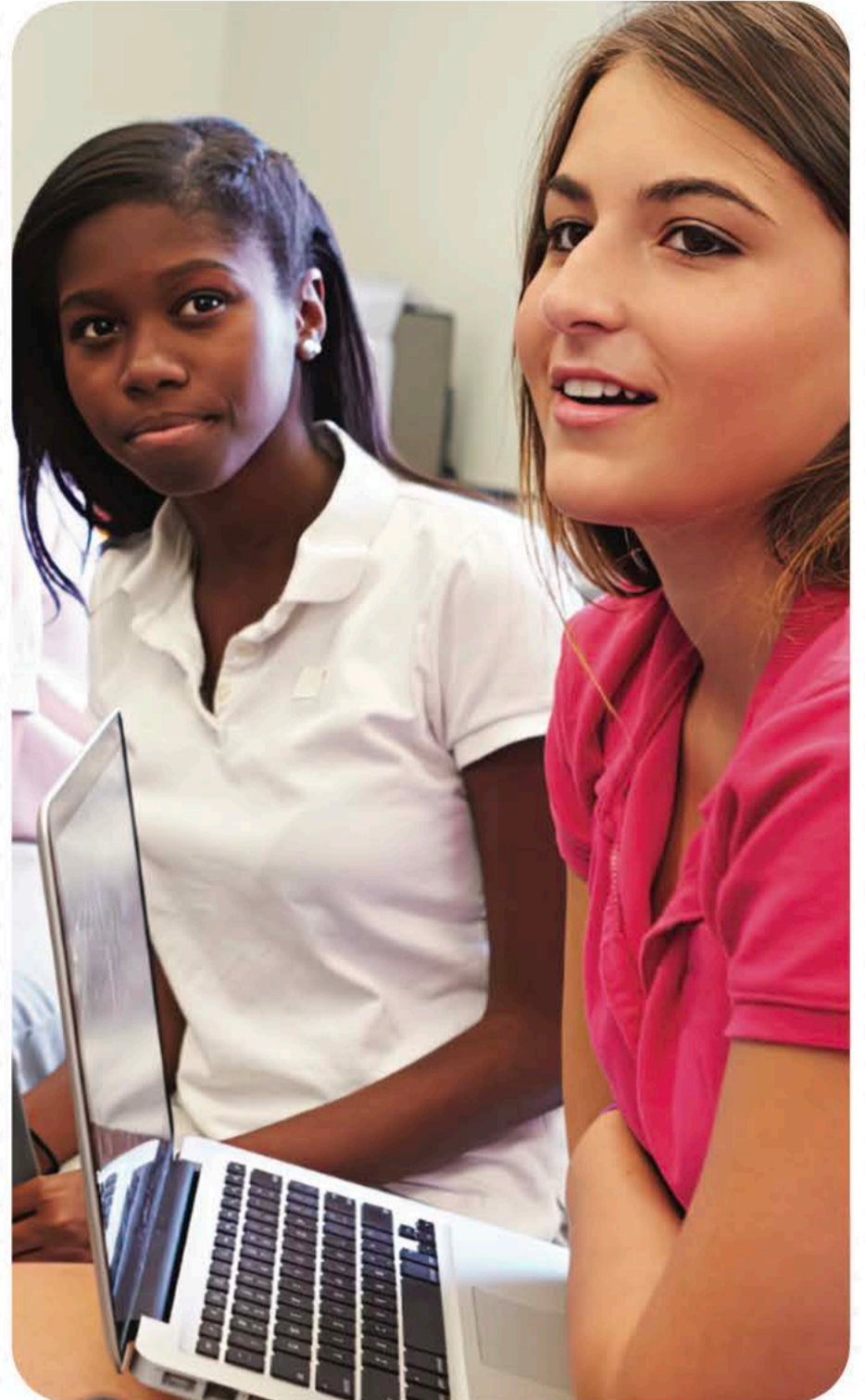
Joyce was recently invited to speak about her experience at a Southern California Apprenticeship Network event and inspired the hundred-plus audience with her story.



***"It's been a very humbling experience," Joyce said of her apprenticeship experience. "It's boosted my confidence a lot. I would have never thought I could have entered the medical field, and to be able to come out learning so many medical terms that I will use in my new career is a confidence-building experience."***

From being unable to walk without mobility devices to making confident strides towards a long-term rewarding career in the allied healthcare industry, Joyce's story shows what is possible through the power of apprenticeship!





# Career Launchpad

*Helping school-leavers with a disability launch a rewarding career*

**MANY OF THE** challenges and barriers faced by people with a disability when entering the world of competitive integrated employment begin in high school.

A key factor influencing the disability employment gap is the quality and depth of the transition planning students with a disability receive as they prepare to take this formative step.

It's a transition that's crucial to get right because the quality of each individual's transition can have lifelong implications.

While students who successfully make this transition can greatly improve their long-term economic future, wellbeing and social inclusion



outcomes, those who struggle during this time are at greater risk of permanent underemployment, economic insecurity and social exclusion.

Although approximately one in six current American school students identify as having a disability, the level of support provided to these students as they transition from secondary education varies significantly by state and school system.

Several studies have demonstrated the value of actively engaging students with a disability in school-to-work transition planning exercises and activities. One study even found that students with an intellectual disability who took part in transition planning were **four times** more likely to experience positive employment outcomes as a result of the development and inclusion of employment goals in an Individual Education Plan. These goals also positively affect student motivation, career awareness and goal setting.<sup>17</sup>

By expanding the scale, scope and quality of the services provided to support people with a disability better transition from school to work, we have a foundational opportunity to reduce the disability employment gap.

Recognizing we need to do more to better support people with a disability in making the school-to-work transition, IWSI America is proud to be launching a new program specifically aimed at tackling the transition gap.

In partnership with the Californian Government Department of Rehabilitation, in 2023 IWSI America will commence **Career Launchpad**, a dynamic new vocational skills and career transition support program, focused on enabling Californian high school students to face their educational transition

with the employability skills and confidence required to realize their professional and personal ambitions.

Working closely with key stakeholders – parents, guardians, local school, district and post-secondary education partners, local and regional employers, community organizations, employer and industry groups – **Career Launchpad** will provide participants with access to a customized job-readiness program including Job Exploration Counseling, Workplace Readiness Training, and Student Placement and Paid Work Experience Services, in addition to a range of personalized pre-employment skills-building activities, mentoring and transition support services.

***“We all want our school-leavers to be equipped with the skills and confidence to pursue and achieve what they want from the world. Our intent is to support students with a disability to develop the skills required to connect with the world of work and to build a rewarding and engaging career.”***

**Nicholas Wyman**  
IWSI AMERICA





# The time is now



**IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT AND** workforce participation for Americans with a disability is the next frontier for the diversity, equity, and inclusion agenda, and it's now time to seize the opportunity.

Americans with a disability were the group most economically affected by the pandemic. A decade of incremental employment gains was cruelly and suddenly reversed, with the unemployment rate for Americans with disabilities peaking at 18.9 percent in April 2020.

However, as the pandemic normalized 'working from home', it also fundamentally changed the way people with a disability could participate in the workforce.

As we moved to rebuild our economy post-pandemic, many smart organizations that took those all-important first steps to establish competitive integrated employment practices also looked to expand the hiring of people with disabilities.

In the face of general labor shortages, 2022 was a year of unprecedented growth in disability employment. In 2022 alone, the percentage of people with a disability in employment grew by record levels – from 19.1 percent to 22.3 percent – with employment growth outstripping growth across the general population.

The rapid growth in disability employment proves what disability advocates have long held: hiring people with a disability into your organization is a decision you will not regret. While this is an exciting development, given the size of the challenge, there is still much more to achieve.

The most effective and sustainable way to overcome the skills shortage is to bring new people into the workforce.

If workers with a disability were employed at the same rate as those without a disability, nearly 14 million more Americans with a disability would have been employed in 2022, our available domestic workforce would have been expanded by more than 9 percent, and our labor supply issues would be solved.

We can capitalize on this growth in disability employment and inclusion in the mainstream labor market by providing new and dynamic opportunities for the one in 4 (and one in 5 school leavers) of our fellow Americans with a disability.

If we are to reach genuinely representative diversity and equality in the workplace, it is time to challenge corporate America, our

**“The biggest impediment to disability employment is not active discrimination but outdated perceptions about the capabilities of people with disabilities and lack of knowledge about how easy and uncomplicated it is to support people with disabilities in the workplace.”**

**Dr. Beth Myers**  
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

state and federal governments, and our small business and community sector to work together with the disability community to generate thousands of new high-quality employment opportunities.

It is time for organizations to develop the internal structures and capabilities needed to become disability-confident employers.

**It is time to invest in our future.**

**It is time to invest in people with disabilities.**



**NOW IS THE TIME TO:**

- **Forge a new agenda for disability inclusion and employment for the more than 61 million Americans with disabilities to participate in the economic mainstream.**
- **Create well-paying, rewarding, and sustainable employment opportunities for people with a disability, and tackle the pervasive, outdated perceptions that result in income gaps, and their underrepresentation in the workforce.**
- **Establish new systems and structures within organizations, which embed diversity, equality, and inclusion strategies into organizational recruitment, screening, and selection processes.**
- **Change our concept of workplace and job role design and embed equality of opportunity for people with a disability into training and workforce development systems.**

- **Capitalize on the pandemic-accelerated adoption of flexible work policies and assistive communication technologies to bring millions of Americans with a disability into the workforce.**
- **Educate employers who think that creating a disability employment stream is costly or complicated, and outline the cost of not having a diverse and inclusive workforce.**
- **Transition to a more structurally inclusive economy and redesign our social safety net programs to eliminate 'benefits-lock'. Focus on incentives for the employment of people with a disability.**

**NOW IS THE TIME TO GET TO WORK.**

Whether you are starting at zero or adapting your work environment, IWSI America can help your organization to be a disability-confident employer and harness the social, cultural, and economic benefits of workplace diversity.



# DISABILITY WORKFORCE INCLUSION SERVICES

## IWSI America Services

*Whether seeking to develop a disability employment pathway program, hire an individual or audit your recruitment strategies to reduce unnecessary barriers to employment, IWSI America Disability Employment Services can help your business begin the process with confidence.*



### **Apprenticeship Program Development**

With more than 30 years' experience, IWSI America can help your business by:

- Identifying skills needed to fill talent pipelines
- Helping to recruit target populations
- Developing customized training curriculum
- Identifying weak links in existing programs
- Developing strategies to increase return on investment
- Reducing employee turnover through well designed apprenticeship programs, thereby minimizing recruitment and training costs
- Recruiting intermediaries to manage essential HR functions and provide employees with wrap-around services



### **Recruitment and Screening Support**

- Developing role- and disability-specific sourcing and recruitment strategies
- Sourcing and pre-screening candidates to accommodate specific learning styles and needs
- Advising on role design and potential task modifications
- Developing pre-employment programs to maximize candidate engagement
- Designing and administering trial employment exercises
- Assisting in interviewing and selecting candidates



### **Workplace Onboarding**

- Designing and managing personalized and organizationally customized training plans to support employees with disabilities
- Advising on how to create a thriving and supported workplace environment for employees with disabilities
- Undertaking a comprehensive assessment to determine any workplace modifications or assistive equipment needs
- Conducting workplace inductions and staff introductions
- Delivering transitional training activities to ensure employees understand workplace standards and expectations
- Organizing 'job-ready' supports such as employee transport





### **Post-Placement Support and Administration**

- Liaising with government bodies to ensure compliance with all legal and regulatory obligations
- Ensuring employer access to all available government subsidies and benefits for an employee's support needs
- Sourcing relevant technical and softskills training opportunities to aid continuous skills development
- Ongoing post-placement employee mentoring and support to encourage development opportunities, and ensure early identification and resolution of issues that could affect employee engagement
- Providing access to employee-specific support programs such as counseling, health, and wellbeing services



### **Organizational Advisory Workshops and Training**

- IWSI America Disability Employment Services can work with you to deliver a range of customized disability employment, diversity and inclusion workshops, and disability-specific awareness training sessions for different organizational audiences

 @iwsiamerica  
 iws-america  
 info@iwsiamerica.org

[iwsiamerica.org](http://iwsiamerica.org)

**WSI**america  
NAVIGATING THE NEW WORLD OF WORK



# *Working with IWSI AMERICA to make your workplace more inclusive*

**WE HOPE THE ISSUES** raised in this report have opened your eyes to the problems people with disabilities face in the workplace, and how the business community and government leaders can work to alleviate those challenges. Improving the employment prospects of people with disabilities benefits individuals, companies, and our communities.

We have made several tangible recommendations in this report, but we can also offer more concrete help. IWSI America is your Disability Inclusion Employment specialist. We have decades of experience helping underrepresented communities, including people with disabilities, get into the workforce, build successful careers, and achieve the American dream.

IWSI America has developed numerous award-winning employment strategies. We collaborate with a host of multinationals, governments, and small businesses to adapt human resource and recruitment practices to increase workforce diversity and employment pathways in a range of industries.

Talk with us about how we can help you access new and diverse pools of skilled talent, and strengthen the inclusivity and dynamism of your workplace culture.

***“My message to employers is, simply, get started.***

***You don’t have to reinvent the wheel – there’s an entire community ready, willing and able to help, and eager to help you grow and succeed.”***

**Nicholas Wyman**  
IWSI AMERICA

# *The Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeship*

*Furthering disability employment opportunities within registered apprenticeship programs*

**IN 2016, THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR** simplified regulations about how Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) principles should be applied to Registered Apprenticeship Programs. These regulations require all Registered Apprenticeship Programs to provide equal opportunity to all apprentices and apprenticeship candidates, including women, minorities, and people with disabilities.

The Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeship (PIA), which is supported by the US Office of Disability Employment Policy, helps US employers understand the regulations, and assists and encourages employers to play their part in contributing to the Department of Labor's aspirational goal that 7% of America's apprenticeship workforce comprises qualified individuals with disabilities.

If you are an employer who wants to bring into your workforce the unique strengths, talents, skills, knowledge and perspectives of people with a disability, and ensure your Registered Apprenticeship Program complies with the Federal Government's EEO regulations, IWSI America heartily recommends the PIA's Apprenticeship [Equal Employment Opportunity Toolkit](#).

The Toolkit is designed to encourage employers to sponsor apprentices and includes valuable advice about the value of inclusive apprenticeships, how to develop equal opportunity policies, conduct outreach, recruit apprentices, prevent harassment, provide reasonable accommodations, develop an affirmative action program, and encourage self-identification of disabilities.

# Glossary of terms

*IWSI America has included this important glossary of terms to expand on key terms and definitions commonly used in the discussion of disability employment in the US.*

## **A**

**Accessible Technology** Technology that can be used by people with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. It incorporates the principles of universal design, whereby each user can interact with the technology in ways that work best for them.

### **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**

Signed into law on July 26, 1990, the ADA is a wide-ranging civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability.

It affords Americans with disabilities protections similar to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made illegal discrimination based on race, religion, sex, national origin, and other characteristics.

**Assistive Technology (AT)** Any item, piece of equipment, or product system that is used to increase, maintain or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. Examples include message boards, screen readers, refreshable Braille displays, keyboard and mouse modifications, and head pointers.

## **D**

**Disability** According to the CDC, a disability is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to perform certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions). There are many types of disabilities such as those that affect a person's vision, movement, thinking, memory, learning, communicating, hearing, mental health and social relationships.<sup>16</sup>

Although 'people with disabilities' sometimes refers to a single population, this is a diverse group of people with a wide range of needs. Two people with the same type of disability can be affected in very different ways. Some disabilities may be hidden or not easy to see.

## **E**

**Equal Opportunity** An opportunity for people with disabilities to participate and benefit from programs and services that are equal to and as effective as the opportunity provided to people without disabilities.

**Employment** Employment means full- or part-time work, including self-employment.

**Competitive Employment** Individuals with disabilities are paid the same as people without disabilities for doing the same or similar work. The law specifies that competitive pay cannot be less than minimum wage.

**Integrated Employment** Individuals with disabilities have opportunities to interact with co-workers without disabilities in the workplace to the same extent as any other employee performing the same or similar work. The focus is on interacting with non-disabled co-workers, not with supervisors or disability support providers.

**I**  
**Impairment** A physical impairment is a physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the bodily systems. A mental impairment is any mental or psychological disorder.

**Individual with a Disability** A person with any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to perform certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions).

**O**  
**Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP)** Under the US Department of Labor, the ODEP provides national leadership by developing and influencing disability-related employment policies as well as practices that affect the employment of people with disabilities.

**R**  
**Reasonable Accommodation** A modification or adjustment to a job, the work environment, or the way things usually are done that enables a qualified individual with a disability to enjoy an equal employment opportunity. For example:

- Modifications or adjustments to a job application process that enable a qualified applicant with a disability to be considered for the position;
- Modifications or adjustments to the work environment, or to the manner or circumstances under which the position held or desired is customarily performed, that enable a qualified individual with a disability to perform the essential functions of that position;
- Modifications or adjustments that enable a covered entity's employee with a disability to enjoy equal benefits and privileges of employment as are enjoyed by other similarly situated employees without disabilities.

**Reasonable Modification** A public entity must modify its policies, practices, or procedures to avoid discrimination unless the modification would fundamentally alter the nature of its service, program, or activity.

**U**  
**Universal Design (UD)** Also known as “inclusive design” and “design for all,” this is an approach to the design of products, places, policies, and services that can meet the needs of as many people as possible throughout their lifetime, regardless of age, ability, or situation.



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# Endnotes

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