

Anyone Can Work

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Many of the values, ideals, and laws of the United States are based on the objective that there should be equal opportunities for everyone. Rhode Island has long been in support of these principals, having been the first place to spread the idea of religious freedom. There have been advances all around the world with equality issues like gender, race, and sexual orientation. Another issue that is still prevalent today, and one that is often overlooked, is the inequality faced by disabled people in the workforce. According to the US department of labor, the unemployment rate in 2018 for people from 16 to 64 with a disability was more than twice the rate of those with no disability. This excludes over 3 million people in the United States from the workforce. It is true that some of these people are simply unable to work, however, most of them are very capable. By excluding such a large group of people, the country's workforce loses the skill and new ideas that many of these people have the potential to provide.

So what is the importance of hiring disabled people? Why would this bring a positive change to the community? Many employers overlook an application from a person simply because they have some sort of disability, whether it's mental or physical. However, a workplace does face many benefits from hiring disabled people. Integrating the disabled into different jobs brings diversity to the workforce. Both workers with and without a disability can see the benefits of working with each other. "By working alongside employees with disabilities, individuals who are not disabled will become more aware about how to make the workplace and other settings more inclusive and accessible to everyone" (Murillo). Learning to become more aware of others and more inclusive serves to be a great advantage for any community. As more and more areas push for this equality, communities will see consideration of others build in their workforce.

People with disabilities are also very capable of being reliable employees. According to the Chicago Lighthouse, an organization dedicated to help support the disabled in Chicago, states that there are many studies that “have shown that people with disabilities take less absent days, and that they are more likely to stay on the job longer than non-disabled workers” (Murillo). So, not only does hiring the disabled benefit the overall community, but it also can be beneficial to the employer. Creating a sense of inclusion and awareness around the country with a more diverse workforce has the power to open up minds to true equality.

Rhode Island has been one of the first states to recognize the potential of the employment of disabled people, and act on it. Rhode Island implemented the policy of Employment First in 2013 through the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities, and Hospitals (BHDDH). Employment first is a policy that helps support meaningful employment, fair wages, and career advancement for people with disabilities. By administering this policy, “Rhode Island is part of the national movement toward a greater emphasis on community employment ... designed to integrate individuals with disabilities into their communities, providing them with the same opportunities and responsibilities as all citizens” (BHDDH). With Employment First, Rhode Island has seen some positive results. Just from 2013, when the policy was adopted, to 2014, Rhode Island went from 34% to 36% of people with a disability who are employed. However, there is still more to be done. Since the first couple years with Employment First, there hasn't been much more improvement. Disabled Americans typically get lower wages than those without a disability. For the past few years, people with a disability have been earning “less than 70% of the median earnings for those without a disability according to the Census Bureau.” (Bialik). In order for Rhode Island to take the next step towards achieving equality in the state, they need to keep a long term commitment to the Employment first policies.

The State Employment Leadership Network affirms that states should focus their resources on “integrated employment, a service system that provides consistent and high-quality employment assistance and supports, and measurement and accountability for achieving employment outcomes.” (SELN). If Rhode Island can work towards taking these steps, then they can clear a path where other states can follow suit.

Encouraging the employment of the disabled is not something that can only be achieved at the state level. The advancements of including disabled individuals in the workforce are benefits that can be enjoyed all around the world. Plans, such as the Employment First initiative, are policies that are not limited to the United States. No matter where a person lives, what language they speak, or what their culture is, most can find enjoyment in meaningful work. The BHDDH recognizes that “People are healthier, safer and happiest with meaningful work. They have relationships with co-workers, fewer health issues, and an increased sense of wellbeing.” (BHDDH). Not only can employment bring happiness to some, but it also can lift people out of poverty. Creating policies that include the disabled will help get millions of people off the streets and into a job. As a minority group, disabled people are often overlooked. The World Bank Group states that “Persons with disabilities are more likely to experience adverse socioeconomic outcomes than persons without disabilities, such as less education, poorer health outcomes, lower levels of employment, and higher poverty rates.” (Schrader-King). Employment of these people is the first step to eradicating their disadvantages. Achieving complete equality of all the disabled in the world, and even just with in the United States, is a momentous task. However, starting with small programs and plans can help a small idea grow into a movement. Communities with disabled people all around the world could find profit in implementing inclusive employment policies.

There is never going to be a perfect solution to the difficulties faced by the disabled when it comes to employment. However, there are steps that can be taken to improve the situation. The Employment First plan has spread to over 40 states in the country and other states are working on new policies like it as well. Continuing to build on these programs will bring success and fulfillment to the disabled community. Achieving equality for everyone around the world is something that is likely never to happen. However, making small advances towards that ultimate goal brings a tremendous amount of hope and empowerment to all different groups. Including the disabled in the workforce has so many benefits, not only to those individuals, but also to the people working with them. If even a small state like Rhode Island can start to create change, then progress is being made. Even increasing the equality of one of the many minority groups can ignite change that has the potential to spread around the world.

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