

Employability in Information Technology for Women with Disabilities: An under-utilized portion of the workforce

**Sandy Freudenberg, Rachel Sartin
IBM Corporation**

Abstract - According to the U.S. Census Bureau survey conducted in 2003, there are 6,642,845 women in the U.S. of working-age (21-64) with a physical disability, and, 69% of these women are not employed. Additionally, the number of women with disabilities is increasing while the employment rate is decreasing (Houtenville, 2006). In light of these statistics, it seems worthwhile to consider that there is a great deal more we can do to raise awareness and bring these women into the workforce.

Why pursue recruitment and hiring of women with disabilities? There are several compelling reasons, including:

- Retention rates of employees with a disability are high
- Employees with a disability show immense loyalty to a company
- Employees with a disability have a positive effect on staff
- Most reasonable accommodations cost little, and many people with a disability do not require any accommodations
- Disability is a normal part of life, experienced by almost everyone, particularly when we get older
- Most people with a disability have no disability for much of their lives
- People with a disability are among the largest minority group in the US

Section 1 of this paper examines some of the primary and more dramatic barriers that still exist for women with disabilities to enter the workforce. In section 2 we investigate the employer best practices / culture and discuss how well they are addressing outreach, recruitment, and support for employees with disabilities. We also review current status of the existing legislation (i.e., The Americans with Disabilities Act) and to what degree established mechanisms are meeting intended goals. In section 3 we propose some actions we believe are necessary for employers to help 'close the gap' and increase the participation of women with disabilities in the IT workforce. This paper intends to demonstrate that while credible successes are visible, we must continue responsibly and aggressively to improve the number of women with disabilities that are recruited into the IT workforce.

Section 1: Do women with disabilities face barriers to enter the workforce?

Women with disabilities face a number of barriers to be taken seriously and enter the workforce. Among the most significant barriers is attitudinal, stereotyping, or 'fear of the unknown'. It is documented numerous times that a common perception among employers is that persons with disabilities may require expensive adjustments or accommodations in the workplace. Social attitudes suggest that co-workers also have hidden feelings toward persons with disabilities. Co-workers often anticipate that a person with a disability will receive special treatment in the workplace. They predict someone will be required to do more work as a result of perceived lack of skills or expected absenteeism. This particular barrier is well known in the disability community but it is a difficult perception to change since these attitudes can be subtle, unspoken and impossible to prove in some cases.

A second and significant barrier relates to how persons with disabilities are represented across the total population. Different types of impairment taken as a whole represent the *largest minority group* at approximately 15% of worldwide population according to the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. (2005) The reason this statistic is not well known is partially because persons with disabilities choose not to be singled out. In most cases, persons with disabilities do not choose to be identified, recorded or tracked different from the rest of the population.

Furthermore, the statistics that are published are often conflicting on every level. Credible surveys are one of the few means by which we can track progress. Available surveys today include those conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. These surveys are based on data from a sample population and published at a 90% certainty. Researchers Sonja Feist-Price and Neena Khanna (2003) suggest that "research dealing with people with disabilities and employability has taken a 'gender-blind' approach, assuming the irrelevance and non-influence of sex." In addition, these researchers suggest that "women with disabilities are faring far worse than their male counterparts in employment....men with disabilities are nearly twice as likely to be employed, earning 44% more than their female counterparts." (Feist-Price, et al. 2003). Therefore, without proper representation it is difficult for the women in this community to have a voice and achieve the necessary changes in employer attitudes, public and private policy, and general public perception.

Another factor that has damaged the disability community is the negative ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) related lawsuits. While there are some areas where employers have been truly negligent in accommodating ADA standards, many have successfully won their cases. A number of papers and reports have been published that describe 'ADA Lawsuit Abuse' or 'drive-by ADA lawsuits'. These lawsuits are typically produced by aggressive lawyers simply seeking fast claims while many businesses want to do the right thing – given the chance. This barrier is another attitudinal barrier on a more serious level. If a person with a disability is brought into the workplace in a community where these attitudes are profound it is likely to have negative ramifications for both the individual and many employees in the organization.

Finally, fear of losing financial security and/or health benefits afforded the disabled through laws affects nearly one third of the disability population. These programs and policies from the Federal Government represent another major barrier for persons with disabilities to consider entering the workforce. Without the protection of knowing an employment opportunity can provide equivalence with existing income and benefits, the disabled individual supported by

these programs (e.g., Social Security Income [SSI], Social Security Disability Income [SSDI], and Medicaid) may be apprehensive to enter the workforce. While these programs were designed to provide income support, they lack emphasis for equal opportunity, independence, and self-sufficiency. According to the Disability Advocates of America, on average, SSDI benefits replace just under half of what persons with disabilities were previously earning (the national average is just over \$800 per month). Therefore, many persons with disabilities may not be aware that they stand to improve their financial well being by returning to the workforce.

Section 2: Are these barriers being addressed?

In response to these barriers there are some solutions that have been proposed, some that are achieving results and evidence there are positive future plans.

Today it is impressive to see that many large organizations are taking appropriate measures and in some cases leading the way by implementing forward thinking strategies to support the disability community. In one example, a large IT company describes their *Accessibility Standards and Regulatory Strategies* to include the following:

1. Drive the expedited development of a consensus global standard on ICT accessibility based on the existing Section 508 standards framework which covers hardware, software, telecommunications and web.
 - The breadth of Section 508 makes it an excellent foundation for a global ICT accessibility standard; it is a standard and a regulation with strong enforcement provisions
 - Most major IT companies already work to meet the Section 508 standards and report their efforts via Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPATs)
2. Expand the leadership role in harmonization efforts for accessibility policy and standards development
3. Discourage the development or adoption of redundant or conflicting ICT accessibility standards *and, to harmonize to a global standard.*

When we take a broader look across a number of other large IT companies there is visible evidence they have made significant progress with their programs to address needs of the disability community. These large enterprises realize that in order for them to grow revenue they must focus on the end customer's experience and in doing so, also address the needs of the aging population and people with disabilities. Many of these large enterprises have documented best practices to improve culture and treatment toward persons with disabilities with a growing number of programs including outreach, recruitment, and networks IT employers have with disability organizations. Other measures result in an impressive list including: programs for mentoring with young disabled students, education programs for managers to raise awareness of disabilities issues, activities to improve employment conditions for people with disabilities, extensive organizations to promote the design and standardization of technologies and accessible solutions, and they provide information about legislation, corporate instructions across their organizations to ensure common understanding.

These employer programs are particularly important to establish common practices for human resource (HR) professionals. It is these professionals who are responsible for the recruitment, pre-employment screening, management diversity education, and other workplace practices that affect the hiring and retention of workers with and without disabilities.

Additionally, many organizations conduct annual surveys for continuous improvement, they make available resources for employees with disabilities including intra-organization network groups to facilitate sharing, and also studies are conducted to design future technology aids and accessible solutions.

Evidence of these action plans and future commitments published by some of the large enterprises is impressive. One technology employer describes their commitment as “Leading the way towards creating a disability inclusive society” (HP, 2006 p.1), and their plans incorporate:

- Continuing to design and produce accessible products, websites, documentation and services, and to work with industry partners and associations to find new and better ways to connect people to the power of technology
- Continuing to promote awareness both inside and outside (the company) on the value of hiring people with disabilities for all types of jobs, and to ensure their inclusion in the company’s global workforce
- Fostering deeper relationships with organizations that act as advocates for people with disabilities, and supporting their programs and activities when possible
- Monitoring, influencing and supporting legislation, regulation and standards for designing accessible electronic and information technology¹

Most importantly, programs that are directly connected to recruitment are beginning to see some results. The *Entry Point* Program is sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in Washington. The program specifically targets people with disabilities, providing them with internship opportunities at high tech companies. Program ACCESS is a University of Arizona and National Science Foundation program seeking to increase the number of Arizona students with physical disabilities who pursue study and careers in Science, Mathematics, Engineering, and Technology (SMET) fields. John Olson, advisory engineer, helped develop the camp for Arizona students with physical disabilities in middle school, high school, and university with an interest in SMET. While most of these programs target school age recruits, there also exists a few programs (i.e., LIFT) that are designed for more severely disabled and retraining for older workers.

In taking a look at the effectiveness of legislation, it is important to recognize that before the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 or the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, no federal law prohibited private sector discrimination against people with disabilities, absent a federal grant or contract. Arlene Mayerson (1992) writes about the history of the ADA and suggests that “the job of the disability rights movement during the ADA legislative process was to demonstrate to Congress and the American people the need for comprehensive civil rights protections to eradicate fundamental injustice -to demonstrate not only how this injustice harms the individual subjected to it, but also how it harms our society.”(p.2). Since the passing of the ADA, we have made positive contributions; however, these have had very little impact on increasing the number

of people with disabilities in the work force. Evidence of this appears in Lewin's July, 2005 report from ABC News entitled "[15 Years Later, Disabilities Law Praised for Transforming Lives – Landmark Act Has Affected Millions, But Some Controversy Persists](#)". In this article, Michael Deland, chairman and president of the National Organization on Disability suggests his organization is watching closely on the proposed modifications to the ADA and paying special attention to what can be done to narrow the employment gap, that without proper wages restricts persons with disabilities from participating in recreation, religious, education and other activities offering enjoyment. (Lewin, 2005)

Section 3: What can employers do to close the gap to bring more women with disabilities into the IT workforce?

Once an individual has been out of the workforce for some time they quickly lose touch with what skills are in demand, what profession would meet their financial needs, and what education or retraining may be required to prepare for re-entry into the workforce. One way employers can bridge this gap is through target recruiting campaigns directed closest to where persons with disabilities live. This will require non-mainstream recruiting practices such as efforts directed toward healing institutions and other places with high populations of disabled. For example, the Nationwide Centers for Independent Living (NCIL) exist in nearly every large community.

The healing organizations often serve as the primary interface for individuals with all levels of disability. By working directly with vocational rehabilitation professionals and counselors employers can target those patients returning for annual re-evaluations. Again, this is the target population among the disabled that are most likely ready to enter (or re-enter) the workforce. This means targeting the more mature disabled individuals (i.e., not newly injured or just becoming independent as a result of a disability). This segment of the disability community at this stage in their rehabilitation are often relatively well adjusted and living independently. On the other hand, new patients are most likely not a good target for recruiting because it may take these individuals months or years before they consider coming back into the workforce—depending on their level of injury / disability.

In recent decades women have taken on more challenging careers and become more physically active. For these reason, another source to find excellent women candidates for employment are U.S. Veterans. There are a growing number of women with disabilities that have entered the population of injured Veterans. To recruit Veterans, one company joined forces with the U.S. Departments of Defense, Labor and Veterans Affairs to provide career opportunities for America's military heroes who are interested in transferring their unique skills, knowledge and abilities into a successful second career through their 'Operation Career Front' initiative started in 2004. Specifically, the U.S. Department of Labor supports the initiative utilizing the Disabled Veteran Opportunity Program (DVOP) specialists located across the nation. In addition, this model company scored high also in their support for Paralympics athletes through special job assistance programs that permitted their disabled employees to participate in the training and Paralympics game event. (The Home Depot, 2002)

Recruiting efforts across each of these forums provides the best opportunity to tap into the community of individuals looking to revitalize their skills and potentially return to the workforce. This also introduces an opportunity for early discussions to help ease concerns about financial parity associated with giving up SSI, SSDI or Medicaid compensation.

Another very important means of reaching out to the disability community is through online communication. There are so many members in the disabled community that do not get out of their homes on a regular basis. Because of this, they have learned to use home-based IT for most of their day to day communications with the outside world. Consider how your company can leverage websites, forums, blogs, and chat rooms to reach this population to provide career information and advertise job fairs or other forms of outreach.

We also encourage employers to place more emphasis on Federal programs and particularly on those programs that encourage or possibly assist the private sector to promote opportunities and independence for persons with disabilities. A government council has been formed to ensure ADA effectiveness in helping individuals realize their full potential and become independent and self-sufficient. Specific topic areas are being focused on by this council and reports on each subject have been published. It would be a worthwhile exercise for both large and small enterprises to compare their internal practices against each of these areas. This exercise is an excellent way to educate staff members on disability laws and the importance of promoting legislation that prohibits discrimination; help them realize the potential of this drastically underemployed segment of the population; and, support persons with disabilities with transition into the workforce. This will also build awareness about the basic rights for the disability community as well as the disincentives these individuals are faced with under 'protection' of the security of federal programs such as SSI, SSDI, or Medicaid.

Employers can also learn from model employers who have achieved recognition for their efforts and have been openly successful in their hiring and retention practices for persons with disabilities. Since 2001, the Secretary of Labor recognizes annually the non-profits, small businesses, corporations and individuals that have demonstrated exemplary and innovative efforts in furthering the employment and workplace environment for people with disabilities. This recognition has been formally presented as a result of the ***New Freedom Initiative***. One of the 2005 individuals recognized was Jim Westall of Port Townsend, Washington. Mr. Westall has been dedicated to providing a range of job opportunities and support services including the notable *work motivation program for low income women*. Discover other exemplary behaviors of the current and previous award winners at this web site>
<http://www.dol.gov/odep/newfreedom/nfi05>

In order to specifically reach women at a young age we must play a key role in guiding them early and let them know about the various career options that may prove valuable and rewarding for them. In order to gain their interest, it is important for educators and families to communicate a vision for these students (women with disabilities). We must assure these youngsters that as they go out into the world – understand that the world is gradually changing to accept them and accommodate their unique needs. To provide early guidance, educators and family members must make every effort to provide the student(s) with continuous encouragement and support along with tools they may require to succeed. Those younger

students who express career goals must be taken seriously, especially by their educators and parents. During high school parents can participate in the disability mentoring events that prove beneficial in exposing the students to possible career directions. Again, during these events, teachers and parents must pay close attention to the student's interest areas to help them prepare in future years to fully realize their potential. For example, we have witnessed in some cases students have not been encouraged to pursue higher education and this is often a prerequisite to achieve their career aspirations. Once the student(s) have been placed in higher education, there are programs like *Entry Point* that will mentor them and help place them in their desired field. Take success stories and use them for other women to identify with and aspire to by increasing exposure and representation across your company and in the media.

The career field involving information technology is an excellent career choice for persons with disabilities as many of them are succeeding because of the increasing ways the technology itself provides accommodations to use and perform their work.

Employers can make their organizations more aware of the resources for mobility impaired individuals. This will help both for outreach programs, internal education / manager training and in general to gain a better understanding for the current challenges and issues for the disability community. A few of these resources are included below.



The DRM WebWatcher – **Women with Disabilities** Being a woman in a still male-dominated society is a challenge. Being a woman with a disability can be doubly so. These sites discuss some of the issues that are unique to women with disabilities.



International MS Support Foundation (IMSSF) - The IMSSF was founded to improve the understanding of multiple sclerosis through education and to promote the reduction of isolation by providing a support network for patients, their families, friends and physicians.



Gazette International Networking Institute (GINI) - GINI's mission is to enhance the lives and independence of polio survivors, ventilator users, and others living with physical disabilities by promoting education, networking, and advocacy among these individuals, health care professionals, and service providers; by publishing information; by funding research; and by coordinating conferences.



National Multiple Sclerosis Society - The mission of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society is to end the devastating effects of Multiple Sclerosis. Their central mission is to provide accurate, up-to-date information to individuals with MS, their families, and healthcare providers.



The mission of the Center for Research on Women with Disabilities ([CROWD](#)) is to promote, develop, and disseminate information to improve the health and expand the life choices of women with disabilities.



[NEW MOBILITY.COM](#) - newmobility.com, the Web site for New Mobility Magazine and the leading online resource for Disability Culture and Lifestyle. Newmobility.com is a tremendous research and communication tool for anyone with an interest in disability issues.



[Lincolnshire Post-Polio Network](#) - The core of this site is an online library of well over one hundred full text articles on Post-Polio conditions, many from peer reviewed medical journals. The library is catalogued to assist reading order and new articles are added typically every few weeks.



[On A Roll](#) - a weekly talk radio show that shatters stereotypes and misconceptions. On A Roll's programming philosophy is to present information, resources and topics for discussion that are universally empowering, universally entertaining, and particularly applicable to the lives of people with disabilities.



[SpinalCord Injury Information Network](#) - The Spinalcord Injury Information Network is funded through grants to the UAB Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Secondary Conditions of Spinal Cord Injury and UAB Model SCI Care System



[WeMedia](#) – A lifestyle magazine for people with physical disabilities, their family and friends. Offers news, features, support, access reports, shopping and more.

Conclusion:

The number of women with disabilities is staggering and they must be afforded the same rights and opportunities as all other persons with regard to employment. Women with disabilities have an important and valuable role ...their importance to society, their essential role in the workforce and as an individual. While we recognize barriers still exist that inhibit the entry (or re-entry) for women with disabilities into the workforce, there are credible measures being led by model organizations that are achieving some success. As employers and leaders, we must ensure we have organizational values and that understanding and acceptance of the disability community exist at every level of the company. We can achieve this through awareness campaigns, management training, targeted outreach programs and continuous improvement that will guarantee a permanent bridge connecting employers with women in the disability community.

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Author Contact Information

Sandra Freudenberg, sjfreud@us.ibm.com
Rachel Sartin, rsartin@us.ibm.com