

Blind People Can't Perform This Job...Or Can They?

Most hiring managers are not aware of the abilities of people who are blind or significantly visually impaired. This is for good reason – the majority have likely not encountered such a person in the workplace during their careers. The prevalence of blindness and visual impairment among people of typical working age is approximately 1.1%. In addition to its low prevalence, people who are blind or visually impaired are much less likely to be working or in the labor force than the general population – only 32.3% were employed according to recent government statistics¹.

The low percentages of people who are blind or significantly visually impaired (henceforth referred to as “legally blind” for brevity) in the labor force should not be construed to mean that legally blind people are generally incapable of being productive employees. It is more likely associated with their difficulties finding employment, which is often attributed to “negative employer attitudes” according to people who are legally blind themselves and professionals who try to help them obtain employment^{2,3}. These reported negative attitudes are associated, at least in part, with a lack of knowledge hiring managers have about this population.

Knowledge of Hiring Managers

First, consider whether you know the answers to the following questions:

Are you aware of any ways in which a person who is legally blind can:

1. access pre-printed material (i.e., documents printed out on paper)?
2. access a computer to use the internet, email, or utilize standard computer software?
3. use general office equipment, such as a multifunction document center (copier/printer/scanner with LED display) or multi-line telephone system?

4. utilize standard industrial equipment or machinery (like sewing machines or production equipment)?
5. handle a cashier position (including taking money, making change, and managing a cash register)?

See Appendix A for the answers. If you did not know the answers, you are in the large majority of hiring managers in two recent research studies. Of the 579 hiring managers who participated in the studies, 447 (77.2%) did not know how legally blind people could perform any of these tasks. Some knew how they could perform one task (16.1%), but very few knew how they could perform two or more tasks (6.7%). It is important to realize that people who are legally blind can perform all of these tasks, if provided with the appropriate accommodations for their vision loss. For more detailed information about how they can perform these tasks, see our website: <http://www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/businesses/quiz/>.

These 579 hiring managers performed different functions within their companies, including managers/supervisors, owners, CEOs, and human resources personnel. We were interested in determining whether human resources (HR) personnel had more knowledge about how legally blind people perform work tasks than other hiring managers. As it turns out, HR personnel do have more knowledge in this area, but even their knowledge is low (average knowledge score of 0.49 out of a possible score of 5). It is important for HR personnel to have knowledge in this area, because many hiring managers in our study reported that they would go to their company's HR department if they needed help with accommodating an employee who is legally blind.

A typical view of many hiring managers is that legally blind people should work and should be given an opportunity to work, but that they would not be able to perform the jobs at

their company⁴. The reality is that legally blind people can perform a much wider variety of jobs than most people realize. With the exception of jobs that require driving or specific visual functions, most jobs can be accommodated to allow a legally blind person to perform them. It is simply the knowledge of the available accommodations that is lacking.

Attitudes of Hiring Managers

In our studies of hiring managers^{5,6}, we also assessed their attitudes towards people who are legally blind as employees. Attitudes varied widely, from completely negative to completely positive, with average scores falling approximately in the middle of the scale. HR personnel had more positive attitudes towards people who are legally blind as employees compared to other hiring managers. HR personnel were also more likely to report that they had hired someone who is legally blind in the past, with 42.3% having hired someone compared to 27.6% of those in other hiring positions. Our study results indicated that there is a strong association between having hired someone in the past, knowledge, and attitudes. So hiring managers that have more knowledge and/or have hired someone in the past are more likely to have more positive attitudes towards legally blind people as employees.

Reasons to Consider Hiring a Legally Blind Employee

Many companies today have a goal of a diverse workforce, and employing someone who is legally blind certainly contributes to meeting that goal. People who are legally blind and in the labor force tend to be more highly educated than the general population, with many having college degrees. They also tend to be good problem solvers and creative thinkers, as they have had to use problem solving skills and creativity to cope with their disability in a visual world. These are basic skills that most businesses are looking for these days. In our study, almost all hiring managers who had hired someone who was legally blind rated their performance as above

average (57.9%) or average (38.9%). Individuals who are legally blind also tend to make dedicated employees who are less likely than other workers to leave their jobs. If your company struggles with high turnover, hiring legally blind employees may contribute to the stability of your workforce.

There are several federal laws that attempt to eliminate discrimination against and encourage the hiring of people with disabilities, including the Section 503 regulations of the Rehabilitation Act, passed by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) that became effective in 2014⁷. These regulations apply to all federal contractors, and one new component of the law is the establishment of a utilization goal of 7% for individuals with disabilities, meaning that companies should strive for at least 7% of their workforce to consist of people with disabilities. This law also requires contractors to collect information about the number of individuals with disabilities who apply for jobs and the number of individuals with disabilities they hire in order to create greater accountability for employment decisions and practices. Employing people who are legally blind can help federal contractors meet these requirements.

Another law that encourages the hiring of people with disabilities is the federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit. This law provides a tax credit of up to \$2,400 for a new employee referred by a Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency, which is a state agency that provides employment services to people with disabilities. Some states provide a similar, additional tax credit for hiring VR referrals. In addition to these financial incentives offered by governments, many VR agencies offer on-the-job training or paid work experiences for people who are legally blind. The VR agency may be able to provide the salary for an individual who is legally blind to work at a business for a designated period of time, allowing the business to try the candidate

before making a hiring decision. In addition, the agency can provide assistance with training for a newly hired legally blind employee at the business.

How to Identify Qualified Applicants who are Legally Blind

You may be convinced that you should consider a legally blind applicant for your company's open positions, but are wondering where you can find one. Given the low incidence of blindness/visual impairment and the low participation rate of this population in the labor force, you may have never encountered an applicant who is legally blind. The best way to identify a qualified applicant who is legally blind is through your state VR agency. Each state has a VR agency that helps people who are legally blind prepare for and obtain employment. You can find your state's agency on this list: <http://www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/information-and-resources/ncsab/>.

Another recent federal law, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act⁸ (WIOA), requires VR agencies to provide services to business, in addition to the services they provide to people with disabilities. Most VR agencies have been providing services to business, but this activity is expected to increase with the passage of WIOA. These services are available at no cost, providing to businesses VR professionals who possess expertise about blindness/visual impairment and necessary work accommodations. If the VR professional understands what your company is looking for in applicants, he or she can pre-screen candidates and send you only people who are qualified for your open positions. Additional services that VR professionals can provide, based on your business needs, are:

Disability awareness/Sensitivity presentations. This involves providing presentations or training to businesses to increase awareness and knowledge about disability-related issues.

They can be general presentations on disability or blindness/visual impairment, or they can be specifically tailored to the business' needs.

Jobsite assessments. A jobsite assessment involves analyzing the existing job site to evaluate accessibility issues and make recommendations to improve accessibility and safety.

Job analyses. A job analysis involves carefully evaluating a job to identify its essential job duties and requirements and the relative importance of the duties. It allows the VR professional to ensure that a job can be done by a legally blind employee and to appropriately identify qualified applicants.

Assistance with accommodations. A VR professional can use information from the job analysis combined with the individual candidate's level of vision to identify the appropriate accommodations to enable the person to fulfill the job requirements.

Assistive technology assessment. To determine whether assistive technology used by legally blind people will function with the software used by the business.

Education about financial incentives to hiring. In addition to providing information about them, the VR agency may be able to handle the paperwork associated with federal and state tax incentives.

Consultation about current employees with vision loss. VR agencies can help a business retain employees who are beginning to lose their vision, or whose vision loss is worsening. Many businesses lose valuable employees because of vision loss, when the person actually could have stayed on the job if provided with the correct accommodations. Retaining a valuable employee can provide a significant cost savings to your company.

Employer training & technical assistance. VR professionals can provide one-on-one training/technical assistance on such topics as disability etiquette in the workplace,

interviewing do's and don'ts, accommodations, and identifying essential functions of a job. They can also provide training to staff specifically about interacting with a new employee who is legally blind.

Post-hire follow-up. VR professionals will provide follow-up services after placing a legally blind person with a business. This will ensure that the new employee is working out from the business' perspective and that the business' needs are being met.

Ongoing availability. VR agencies can make themselves available to a business at any time in the future, in case any questions or problems come up. Some hiring managers and VR professionals develop an ongoing relationship that includes regular contact, with the hiring manager's preferences for amount of contact determining the frequency.

Conclusion

Working with a VR agency to identify, employ, and accommodate people who are legally blind is a win-win situation. It can help federal contractors recruit prescreened, qualified applicants for their open positions, helping them meet their affirmative action requirements and their utilization goals. It can help all companies employ a more diverse workforce while adding loyal employees. In fact, a large majority (82.5%) of the hiring managers in our second study who had hired someone who is legally blind had communicated with a VR agency about employing people with disabilities. HR professionals should take advantage of these free services provided by VR agencies. Hiring managers may at some point come to HR for assistance regarding blindness/visual impairment, either about an applicant, new hire, or employee who is losing vision. HR professionals should be prepared to provide assistance in these situations, and having a contact at the VR agency will help. HR professionals should also

consider hiring an applicant who is legally blind. As other businesses who have done so have found, the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages.^{9,10}

Appendix A: Answers to Knowledge Quiz

Are you aware of any ways in which a person who is legally blind can:

1. access pre-printed material (i.e., documents printed out on paper)?

Low vision adaptations: photocopier to enlarge the print; use a magnifying glass or a closed circuit television.

Adaptations for little/no vision: use equipment or software that scans documents, and then a computer with screen reader software can read the text aloud or send it to a refreshable braille display; take a picture using a camera on a cell phone or tablet and use special apps to have it read aloud

2. access a computer to use the internet, email, or utilize standard computer software?

Low vision adaptations: a larger computer monitor or software that enhances the size of what appears on the monitor

Adaptations for little/no vision: use a screen reader software package, which reads the words on the screen aloud and/or sends to a refreshable braille display

3. use general office equipment, such as a multifunction document center

(copier/printer/scanner with LED display) or multi-line telephone system?

Low vision adaptations: use a magnifying glass or a portable closed circuit television

Adaptations for little/no vision: memorize buttons and locations, use tactile markings or light probes

4. utilize standard industrial equipment or machinery (like sewing machines or production equipment)?

Low vision adaptations: task lighting, use of contrast, and use of magnifiers or portable closed circuit televisions

Adaptations for little/no vision: use tactile markings or guides to indicate alignment or spacing

5. handle a cashier position (including taking money, making change, and managing a cash register)?

Low vision adaptations: use a task lamp, turn bills upside down to see the larger print on the back, or store the cash drawer in a viewable position

Adaptations for little/no vision: coins can be identified by touch, use a talking device to identify bills, and use different folding techniques to identify bill denominations, keys of the cash register can be memorized, and talking cash registers for people who are blind are available

Notes

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016). [Unpublished data tables of specific disability questions in the Current Population Survey, 2015 Annual Averages]. Washington, DC: Author.

² Crudden, A., Williams, W., McBroom, L. W., & Moore, J. E. (2002). Consumer and employer strategies for overcoming employment barriers. National Research & Training Center on Blindness & Low Vision, Mississippi State University. Retrieved from: <http://www.blind.msstate.edu/research/nrtc-publications/download/>

³ McDonnall, M. C., Zhou, L., & Crudden, A. (2013). Employer attitudes towards persons who are blind or visually impaired: Perspectives and recommendations from vocational rehabilitation personnel. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 79(3), 17-24.

⁴ Inglis, C. (2006). Blind people can do anything but not in my company: Employer attitudes towards employing blind and vision impaired people (Unpublished master's thesis). Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

⁵ McDonnall, M. C., Crudden, A., & O'Mally, J. (2015). Predictors of employer attitudes toward people who are blind or visually impaired as employees. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 42, 41-50.

⁶ McDonnall, M. C. & Crudden, A. (in review). Predictors of employer attitudes toward blind employees, revisited. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*.

⁷ Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, 29 U.S.C. § 793 (2014).

⁸ Work Force Innovation and Opportunity Act, § 414, 29 U.S.C. 3101 et seq. (2014).

⁹ McDonnall, M. C. & Crudden, A. (2015). Building relationships with businesses: Recommendations from employers concerning persons who are blind/visually impaired. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 81(3), 43-50.

¹⁰ Wolffe, K. & Candela, T. (2002). Expanding the labor pool: Recruiting, hiring, and retaining workers with visual impairments. *Employment Relations Today*, 29, 59-68.