



Study: Disabled hiring rate has improved over the last year

By: Anne Wallace Allen | March 9, 2018



Oil industry workers. People with disabilities have made gains in the job market over the last year, according to a report from the University of New Hampshire. File photo.

With the national unemployment rate at a 17-year low, fewer U.S. workers are searching for employment.

And employers who are having trouble filling positions are turning to a traditionally untapped source of talent: people with disabilities. The hiring rate for the disabled has increased by 10 percent in the last year, according to an analysis by the University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disability and the New Jersey-based Kessler Foundation. However, the study says employment among this group still hasn't returned to its pre-recession levels.

More than 56 million Americans have a disability, and they tend to experience a higher unemployment rate and a greater likelihood of living

in poverty than those without disabilities.

But a favorable labor market and improved advocacy efforts are helping. Businesses and nonprofits are also strengthening their commitment to diversity and inclusion.

The disabled themselves also need to realize they should take the risk of applying for jobs instead of assuming they won't be interviewed or hired, said Toni Carter, who is inclusion and diversity lead in the human resources department at the Idaho National Laboratory in Idaho Falls. Carter said the worry that employers are biased discourages people with disabilities from applying for positions in the first place.



Jane Donnellan

"People with disabilities are uncomfortable with trusting their colleagues to do the right thing. They tell me," Carter said. She recalled asking a colleague if she would be willing to reveal information about her learning disability.

"She said, 'absolutely not,'" Carter said. "I have enough issues holding my own ground, and if I let people know, they would never respect me."

The Kessler/UNH study said January job numbers showed that the employment-to-population ratio for people with disabilities had increased from 27 percent in January 2017 to almost 30 percent in January 2018, up 10 percent. For working-age people without disabilities, the report said, the employment-to-population ratio also increased in that time period, but only by .4 percent.

"This month's increase in the employment-to-population ratio is truly impressive," said Andrew Houtenville, the associate director of economics at UNH and research director of the Institute on Disability, of January. "It's the largest increase we've seen during the current upward trend in gains in the labor market for people with disabilities."

People with disabilities are still not employed at the rate they were before the Great Recession, noted John O'Neill, director of employment and disability research at the Kessler Foundation.

Carter noted that companies have always hired people with disabilities; they just might not know it. She recalled a friend who was a manager at a prior employer, who worked in accounts payable and had multiple sclerosis.



Toni L. Coleman
Carter

"I was one of the few people who knew that every Friday night she went home and had to stick a needle into one of her thighs, and she was inside the house all weekend because of the medication," Carter said.

Now that Carter is in the inclusion and diversity field, she said, she meets many people with disabilities.

"Ninety percent of them don't have a visible disability," she said.

That said it can still be a struggle to integrate people with some disabilities into the workplace. For example, between 66 and 80 percent of autistic adults are unemployed, said Rachel Rosner, director of education and support services at AutismUp, a Rochester, N.Y. nonprofit. "And of that number of people who are employed, the vast majority of those people are underemployed."

Training helps, said Rosner. It can "explain the why behind the behaviors and mannerisms that can make someone else anxious about interacting with someone who has autism," she said.

For job-seekers who worry they'll face discrimination, Carter suggested pursuing employment with organizations that are mandated to employ a certain number of people with disabilities, such as many federal contractors.

"There is a legal obligation now for federal contractors to have 8 percent of identified people with disabilities in their pipeline," Carter said. "They can freely check the box 'yes,' and if they're qualified, they're going to get a call, because these people are having a hard time meeting their numbers."

Sheila Livadas contributed to this story.

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