**Amended Americans with Disabilities Act opens up new opportunities**

More impairments covered and accommodations clarified

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February 26, 2010

     Twenty years ago, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became the law of the land, possibly one of the single greatest legislative advancements for people with disabilities in our nation's history.  The ADA helped give hope that our founding fathers' dream of universal equality would finally apply to people with disabilities, and that discrimination in the workplace would be a thing of the past.

     Unfortunately, a series of court decisions chipped away at the legislative intent of ADA and prevented it from fully achieving its desired goal. So, in 2008, President George W. Bush signed revisions to the law to ensure that it fulfills its intent - to open the doors to the workplace more widely for people with disabilities, so they can compete on a level playing field and enjoy the financial, personal and social benefits derived from work.

      Because of these changes, more people with disabilities will be included within the protections of the ADA. Which means that more people with disabilities will have an opportunity to work and be eligible for the workplace supports which will help them be the kind of valuable and productive employees that business needs, and that they desire to be.

      As the former head of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, I have said, repeatedly, that people with disabilities are one of our country's most valuable and underutilized sources of talent. Their full inclusion into the American workplace and economy will trigger a wave of innovation and growth which will help power our economy for generations to come.

      That's why, right now, it is imperative for those of us with disabilities to take charge of our careers and get informed about these important changes to ADA.

      You may be a worker with a disability who has shied away from seeking an accommodation.  As a result, you may not have achieved as much as you would have liked to on the job, and want to know if these changes can help you.

      Or you could be an older employee whose once mild impairment has progressed to a point where a little help may enable you to maintain your productivity and extend your career, and you need to know if these protections cover you.

      Or you may be entering the job market for the first time and want to know if these protections apply to you and your specific disability, because you are eager to prove your ability, and grow with a company that looks at talent first.

      These new amendments will open the doors for potentially millions of people to receive the help they need to achieve the career success and satisfaction they desire. However, neither ADA nor the amendments of 2008 should be construed as an affirmative action program. These are protections designed to make sure that you are not discriminated against purely because of a disability.

      Essentially, the amendments mean that more people will soon be provided protection and assistance under the law of the land, creating more opportunities, and a more level playing field in the workplace, and this will benefit people with disabilities, employers and all Americans.

      Linda Batiste, a consultant with the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) which partners with the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the US Department of Labor, believes that, “These changes [to the ADA] will make a quantum leap forward for people with disabilities in the workplace.  They will help employees get the accommodations they need to be successful and employers to benefit from their employees performing at their top capacity.  It is truly a win/win.”

      Defining which specific impairments or conditions will be covered under the ADA is in the process of being completed.  This makes it more important than ever that workers, students and job seekers keep up to date on how these changes are progressing and can positively impact their careers.

      [Gettinghired.com](http://www.GettingHired.com) is one online resource and networking site specifically designed to help answer some of these questions while providing practical tools to connect people with disabilities to companies looking to hire top employees, not because of their disabilities, but for their abilities.

      The U.S. Department of Labor's employer outreach programs that I managed and expanded during the previous administration have helped peel away many negative stereotypes that in the past have harmed career opportunities for people with disabilities.  In fact, today, many businesses actively seek to hire people with disabilities as they've come to realize that they are the next great wave of untapped talent in America.  So, many companies are increasing recruitment efforts directed toward people with disabilities to fill roles throughout their companies in order to increase their bottom lines. The employer members of GettingHired.com, companies like Pepsi, Microsoft, Lowe's, Kodak and Merck, all realize that talent has no disability, it is just talent!

      Batiste reports that, “Employers' attitudes are changing, and there are more opportunities for people with disabilities to get the job they are prepared and qualified to do than ever before.”

      Networking and information websites like Gettinghired.com provide the cutting edge information and social networking avenues that can change a job search from “going it alone” to being engaged with others who are seeking employment in this difficult economy.  Employers post jobs on Gettinghired.com specifically to attract people with disabilities onto their team.

      Businesses have increasingly come to realize that it is imperative that their workforce reflect every aspect of society if they are to attract customers, talented employees and ultimately…increase profits.

      Now it is up to all people with a disability or special need to embrace this change as they enter the workforce or continue along their career path.  People with disabilities should expect that they will be respected and appreciated for their  abilities, and that the workplace accommodations provided to them are a reflection of their employers'  need to make them as productive as possible,. Making employees as productive as possible is simply smart business, whether that employee does or does not have a disability!

      Living with a disability may not always be easy, but with the amended ADA and changing employer attitudes, more people looking for work will have greater opportunities, and people already in the workplace will have additional opportunity to achieve their goals and dreams.

      The freedom to achieve based upon individual ability is fundamental to the American promise, and for people with disabilities the revised ADA will help make this promise more of a reality. This moves us all a bit closer to satisfying the yearning these words stir in our souls: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”