

# Disabilities Act helps, but everyone has a role, too

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By T. Alan Hurwitz

My success as a deaf professional is in no way a chance event. Growing up profoundly deaf with deaf parents in the 1940s and 1950s, when opportunities were scarce, I consider myself fortunate to have had strong family support and a fierce desire to succeed.

Every summer, my mother would make me read a book one hour every day before I could go outside to play. She made sure I met deaf people to learn about their jobs as farmers, barbers or seamstresses. I worked as a busboy, a cabinet maker and a dishwasher and delivered newspapers at 4:30 each morning. I chased turkeys at a farm and washed hundreds of vehicles at a car wash. No job was too trivial.

By trying so many things, I learned what I wanted to do and what I didn't want to do, and that education would be the ticket to my success.

Without any interpreters or note takers or tutors, high school and college classrooms were extremely challenging. It was impossible to read my teachers' lips because they either spoke too fast or moved around too much in the classroom. Exhausted from trying to read lips, I would read and re-read my textbooks and my notes every evening.

Fifteen years ago, President George H.W. Bush helped change that situation for millions of people by signing into law the Americans with Disabilities Act, which guarantees equal opportunity for people with disabilities.

But change comes slowly, and while it has taken longer than hoped, this law has been successful in enlightening many of those who misunderstand disabilities or whose actions are clouded by prejudice and ignorance.

Despite any remaining barriers, it is important to remember that it is the responsibility of each person — with or without disability — to succeed. The government passes laws to enable equal access to all its diverse citizens, which helps level the playing field with others in the job market. Nevertheless, all the support and the equal opportunities are just that — opportunities. Those with a disability have an obligation to attain the self-sufficiency necessary to lead a productive and happy life.

Our society can build all the ramps it wants, but you need to wheel the chair up the ramp to apply for that job. And you must be qualified to do that job. No one can write new software for you or design your new product. Those are your jobs.

Technology and better-educated people with disabilities have allowed more integration in the workforce. Many large companies are hiring people with disabilities; some now have specific disability-hiring initiatives under their corporate diversity programs. The benefits are universal.

Businesses can tap into a skilled labor pool to fill the gap caused by retiring baby boomers, and the person with a disability becomes a contributing member of society, no longer needing taxpayer support.

Hiring people with disabilities is not charity. It's simply good business.

For this successful trend to continue, it is essential for everyone to contribute. Families contribute to the early education and support of their disabled children. Educators contribute by teaching the necessary skills so people can communicate with each other and the world. Technological advances will continue to close the gap for disabled people both in and out of the workplace. As a society, we must bring ourselves to continue to embrace differences and see everyone for his or her contribution.

For the 50 million-plus Americans with disabilities, education will open the door to many interesting jobs and will give you choices in life. Use all the wonderful tools available to you today to get educated and help yourself. Persevere, take risks and don't forget to give back.

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