

Hiring people with disabilities benefits them, business, economy

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Guest essayist

(October 19, 2006) — Rochester business people could find themselves any day working beside a person with a disability. I have traveled the world extensively, and as a profoundly deaf man, I can say that there is no better place to live than in Rochester. Our vibrant deaf community has become that way in large part because of area employers.

With National Disability Employment Awareness Month upon us, it's important to recognize that about 200 local businesses have hired deaf graduates from Rochester Institute of Technology.

I also applaud the many area businesses that have added technology to improve access to Rochester residents with hearing loss. We also have a host of government officials who enthusiastically work hard to improve opportunities for people with disabilities, and media interested in increasing awareness.

Still, more is needed to link Rochester businesses with the underutilized human capital of people with disabilities. Less than 25 percent of working-age people with disabilities are employed in Rochester, a percentage that lags behind the 34.4 percent for New York state and 37.5 percent nationwide, according to a 2005 survey by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The solution to this disparity begins with providing greater educational opportunities for people with disabilities, increasing access to support services, improving technology, and educating employers.

Technology and better education have enabled more people with disabilities to be integrated into the work force. Many large companies are hiring people with disabilities as part of their diversity initiatives.

Understanding each other's differences is critical to any successful relationship. The National Technical Institute for the Deaf at RIT has been holding workshops for employers around the country that not only help them better understand deafness, but provide hands-on practice for integrating deaf workers into the hearing workplace. Employers tell us these workshops have helped answer the questions and alleviate concerns people naturally have when working for the first time with someone with hearing loss.

I encourage you to join the employers in Rochester who are realizing the benefits of hiring workers with disabilities. Businesses can tap into a skilled labor pool to fill the widening gap caused by retiring baby boomers. And the person with the disability becomes a contributing member of society, no longer needing taxpayer support. Hiring people with disabilities is not charity. It's simply good business.

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