

ESBLN Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network
By Jackie Gast, Director

Will you hire a person with a disability? Will you retain an employee who has become disabled? For those business owners who are inexperienced with being around someone with a disability, your first internal reaction to these questions may be "I'd really rather not..." Why do we react that way? Fear of the unknown, maybe.

Did you know that companies who employ people with disabilities find that absenteeism is no higher, insurance costs are no different, workman's compensation claims are no higher and retention is greater than those employees without disabilities? Many companies have experienced increased moral in the areas where these individuals work. Employees believe that if their employer goes the extra mile for an employee who may need an accommodation, that employer will most likely help them some day, if needed. The reality is that any one of us could become disabled at any time and knowing that loyalty still exists is an asset to a company.

Fear, as mentioned earlier, is probably the number one reason that the *Americans with Disabilities Act* was passed in 1990 which stemmed from the civil rights movement of the 60's. Today, people with disabilities, which cross all educational, ethnic and economic lines, encounter prejudice routinely. Prejudice is particularly strong against people with physical disabilities, such as those with mobility impairments. People assume that it would be difficult for that person to travel or participate so opportunities are not even offered. How many non-disabled individuals do you know that will not drive over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge? It is a fact that many people with disabilities cross that bridge daily! As one can imagine, acquiring gainful employment for people with disabilities can be a challenge.

Ironically, many companies and organizations already unknowingly employ individuals with disabilities. Many have made accommodations for current employees and thought nothing of it, for example providing a magnifier for a computer screen or providing a phone with volume control. Many work with no employer accommodations at all.

The Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network (ESBLN) is a business-driven organization that focuses on abilities of individuals instead of disabilities in regard to competitive employment opportunities. Its mission is to assist the business community to increase profitability through employment and consumer diversity within the disability population. Its goals are to share information within the business community on the advantages of recruiting and retaining employees, sharing best practices, identifying accommodation needs, expanding marketing opportunities within the disability consumer market and to serve as a recognized

referral service. The ESBLN hosts a website, www.esbln.org, that includes many resources designed specifically for disability-related business applications.

If you are an employer, I challenge you to look at a job candidate with a disability in a different light. Ask, "Is this person able to do the job? Or "What do I need to do to help this person be successful in my business?" Your reward may be lower turnover, higher morale, greater productivity resulting in greater profits.

If you would like to help with our mission and/or are interested in sponsoring the ESBLN web site, please contact Jackie Gast at esblnjq@aol.com or call 410 749-0144.