

ESBLN October 2005  
Business Journal  
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October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Read on to “walk in the shoes” of a person with a disability. Yes, the following story is true.

I recently was in a noon meeting with someone, I'll call him Mike, with a physical disability who uses a wheelchair and is currently unemployed although active as a volunteer on various advisory committees. Mike would love to change his status from volunteer to employee however he has a major obstacle to overcome. Since he is not gainfully employed, he can not afford a vehicle. Fortunately, there is a public transit system costing \$1 one way that is adequately equipped for wheelchairs.

Mike lives independently and is one quarter mile from the nearest public transit station. His meeting in the next town over is not until noon however, the only time the transit picks up in his town is 5:30 AM. To make that departure time, he has to wake up at 4:00 AM. He has a motorized wheelchair but there are no shoulders or sidewalk along the roadway on his way to the station which makes for a dangerous quarter mile. He takes his notes with him which he precariously places on his lap. Mike's wheelchair isn't designed to “carry things.”

Mike gets to his meeting and fortunately, the entrance door is wide enough for him to enter (minimum 36” wide). He has to use the rest room and hopes the door is wide enough (at least 32”). It would be nice if there were a grab bar near the toilet and very nice if the commode is the right height (at least 17”). He also hopes the sink is not too high (recommended 29” from the floor) and that he can reach the soap and towel dispensers. Good thing the door has a lever handle at an adequate height. Due to restricted use of his hands, a knob would be difficult to turn.

After Mike's one hour meeting comes to an end, he is ready to start his trek home except that his only ride is on the same transit system that does not depart until 4:00 PM. Fortunately, the company where the meeting was held has no problem with him ordering in for lunch and staying there until departure time. Mike is finally home at 5:45; a one-hour and 45 minute trip to travel 30 rural miles.

Now imagine the same trip in rain, snow or in the winter when the days are short and it's dark early in the morning and evening. No, he has no safety lights on his wheelchair. He cannot afford a chair like that because he doesn't have a job.

Imagine the perseverance, determination, creativity, desire and loyalty Mike must have to make trips like this. Individuals with those characteristics would certainly be valuable to any business.

As a progressive and creative business owner, consider offering transportation as a fringe benefit when recruiting and hiring valuable individuals.