

**ESBLN** Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network  
Putting Ability to Work [www.esbln.org](http://www.esbln.org)  
By Jackie Gast, Director

October was National Disability Employment Awareness Month and I have to say, Employers, you have kept us extra busy this month! The ES BLN has had a flurry of activity resulting in at least eleven employment referrals and interview opportunities on the lower shore alone. Much more is done through the many supported employment agencies up and down the shore and I can only guess, based on our activity, that their activity level increased in October as well.

Recently I attended the US BLN Conference and heard the saying, "If you want to think outside the box, hire someone outside the box." That saying definitely applies to the disability population. Talk about problem solvers! Having a problem solver on your team, results in an increased return on investment for your company. And isn't return on investment pretty critical in running a successful business?

Speaking of ROI, IBM presented at the US BLN Conference on this subject. One of their presentation slides was entitled, "Opportunity, Why Should You Care (about people with disabilities)? There's Volume in Numbers and Impressive Spending Power..." IBM cited that "people with disabilities control more than \$1 Trillion in aggregate income and more than \$220 Billion in disposable income annually. People aged 50+ spent nearly \$400 Billion in 2003. 30% of U.S. families have a member with a disability. People with disabilities have almost two times the spending power of teens and more than 17 times the spending power of Tweens – two highly sought after markets." IBM cites their sources as the U.S. Census Bureau and AARP (American Association of Retired Persons).

Ok, so those are great numbers but how do we reach those markets? How about beginning with your web site? Is it accessible to all people? Is it 508 compliant which means can people who have sight and hearing impairments, as well as other disabilities, view it? IBM supported research (IBM/Forrester) that analyzed ten organizations across four industries in North America; banks, airlines, manufacturing and a U.S. federal agency. They concluded that 5 of the 10 organizations who made their web sites accessible, showed positive ROI in the first year. Particularly with the banks, the net ROI was over 4.5 times that of the cost to make and keep their site accessible over a three year period.

It makes sense that people with disabilities spend a lot of time at their computers looking for jobs, shopping, etc. and that their families are also sensitive to accessibility issues. Again, it makes sense that if you hire people with disabilities, people with disabilities will be more likely to patronize your business. Right or wrong, the general public views companies that hire people with disabilities as being socially responsible, however in reality, companies that hire people with disabilities see it as good business practice. The ROI comes in the form of employing good problem solvers, having less employee turnover, and increasing good will.