

The Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network, along with the Eastern Shore Society for Human Resource Management and the Maryland Department of Disabilities recently held a Regional Summit in Ocean City on April 18<sup>th</sup>, called Diversity at Work, Gaining the Competitive advantage. Although diversity was discussed as a whole in a couple of the breakout sessions, the Summit primarily focused on employment of people with disabilities. Even though people with disabilities are a protected class under the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), many times when companies list their diversity efforts or statistics, they do not mention people with disabilities. One of the goals of the Summit was to raise awareness that people with disabilities are people who can, do and want to work.

No event is complete without evaluations, and this summit was no exception. In addition to asking the usual session, presenter and facility questions, all of which were rated quite high by the way, we asked our participants questions about their general employment practices. When asked if the participants' companies had a diversity policy that included people with disabilities, we were pleased that 54% responded Yes but disappointed that 46% responded No. Without a policy, how does a company handle the requirements of the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the EEOC with consistency? By the way, the ADA applies to companies with 15 or more employees. As a good employer realizes, no matter what their size, being consistent and fair with all employees is good business practice.

When asked if participants currently recruit qualified job candidates with disabilities, 64% responded, No, with 36% responding Yes. When participants were asked that in the future, how likely were they to specifically recruit qualified job candidates with disabilities, 93% responded that they were Likely to recruit from this pool of labor. However, when asked about their hiring experience, 74% indicated they had limited experience in hiring people with disabilities. Two of our breakout sessions were about non-traditional recruitment strategies and accommodations. I am hoping most of the above 74% attended those sessions.

Many participants felt the biggest barriers to employing people with disabilities included management, business' poor understanding of people with disabilities, educating hiring supervisors, making accommodations and old facilities and mindsets. In a nutshell, most responses were about education and awareness. The ESBLN is not asking companies for preferential treatment for this group, but for equal opportunity.

In my experience, it seems the companies that are more likely to include recruitment of qualified job candidates with disabilities in their overall recruitment strategies, tend to be successful companies that experience low overall employee turnover. The successful companies tend to withhold judging the ability of a candidate and also allow the candidate to be part of the solution to successful placement. Keep in mind, people

with disabilities live with their disability every day. They have most likely gotten quite good at accomplishing life's challenges long before they came knocking on your door looking for work.