

In 2003, The Able Trust conducted a study of Florida employers concerning their policies, practices, and attitudes related to hiring persons with disabilities. According to the study, "only 33% of all respondents reported being highly aware of disability issues; 50% have no formal policy for hiring individuals with disabilities; 25% feel they are recruiting well; and 35% have disability-training programs. Moreover, the majority of employers showed a lack of familiarity with agencies and programs related to individuals with disabilities (especially those that provide financial assistance). Most employers, however, expressed positive attitudes towards employees with disabilities. Small businesses (less than 20 employees) had more positive attitudes than larger ones." For a complete copy of the study, go to www.abletrust.org/news/study.shtml.

Assuming that we can extrapolate these results to apply to our region, which seems reasonable, business must evaluate their diversity employment practices. By evaluating or creating a diversity policy, doors can open to lowering long term business costs. People with disabilities typically have low turnover and equal to better attendance rates. Many companies report improved morale in those departments where workers with disabilities are stationed. Improved morale results in a improved work environment. Tax credits and deductions are available for a portion of wages paid as well as physical changes to the workplace to accommodate an individual with a disability. In addition, in a 2006 study from the University of Boston, MA "reports overwhelmingly positive attitudes among consumers toward socially responsible companies, and in particular toward those that hire individuals with disabilities. Specifically, 92 percent of consumers surveyed felt more favorable toward companies that hire individuals with disabilities and 87 percent said they would prefer to give their business to such companies" (January issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (Vol. 24, Issue 1, IOS Press).

Attending the ESBLN Regional Employer Summit, Diversity at Work, Gaining the Competitive Advantage, will allow you to set aside time to network with other businesses on positive results received through their diversity policies. Held at the Clarion Fontainebleau Resort and Conference Center in Ocean City, Maryland, the summit will provide networking opportunities beginning the evening of April 17. The full day summit on April 18 offers a variety of sessions; a Diversity Policy Workshop, Corporate Culture's Impact on Productivity and Retention, Non-Traditional Recruitment Methods, American's with Disabilities Act Warning Signs for Companies, Overcoming the Mystery of Accommodations, and The Who, Why and How of Diversity Marketing – a \$3 Trillion Market. In addition, a success story, Project Search at Fifth Third Bank, is one of the highlights. This program about hiring individuals with disabilities has gotten international attention. Fifth Third Bank along with its affiliates is among the largest money manager companies in the Midwest with locations in ten states. For more information and to register for this important summit, visit www.esbln.org.