

ESBLN Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network
Putting Ability to Work www.esbln.org
By Jackie Gast, Director

Recently, I had an Oprah Ah Ha or more like a Huh moment. I'm just not sure why it took me so long to get it. Over the years, I have heard about many barriers to employment for people with disabilities from both job candidates and employers. This past year, two events were held, one for human resource managers and one for job candidates with disabilities. Comparing the answers from groups' evaluation results, very interesting challenges and questions are raised. As a disclaimer, these results are from a small sampling, however, based on my experience, I feel they are representative. Also, I acknowledge that many managers and job candidates do not fall into the categories below.

In April of 2008 at the ESBLN Business to Business Employer Summit, Diversity at Work, in Ocean City Maryland, participants filled out evaluations asking what they perceived to be the most prevalent barrier to employment for people with disabilities. The top three answers given in order of frequency were lack of management support or education; lack of knowledge about the Americans with Disabilities Act; and lack of knowledge about how to provide an accommodation.

In April 2009, a No Spare Marylander Workshop for job seekers with disabilities was held at the One-Stop Job Market in Salisbury, MD. The participants were also asked about what they perceived to be the greatest barrier to employment. Their answers were lack of self-confidence or fear of rejection; the appearance of the disability; and inadequate communication and awareness.

Ok, now put these two groups together and what do you get? People without confidence trying to sell their skills and strengths to a non-accepting, unsure, wary management. Huh... Pretty tough scenario.

So what do we do about it? **Educate, educate, educate.** If the person can't do the job, don't hire them. If they can do the job with a REASONABLE accommodation, HIRE them. By the way, a reasonable accommodation never includes reducing accepted levels of productivity. If you go the extra mile to accommodate, your new or retained employee will be likely to go the extra mile for you.

Good news. At the time of the summit, only 36% of managers actively included people with disabilities into their recruitment strategies. At the conclusion of the ESBLN Employer Summit, 93% of respondents said they were very likely or somewhat likely to include people with disabilities into their recruitment strategies. As a result of the No Spare Marylander Workshop for job candidates, 100% of the participants who responded to the evaluations said that they felt better prepared for their job search. Even better news, Christine Zabel, a participant in the No Spare Marylander workshop mentioned above, has found part-time employment through the ESBLN/Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce/One-Stop Job-Market network.

The ESBLN is a resource for the nine eastern shore counties of Maryland and Virginia and Delaware. There is no charge, only a wealth of information and support for business. Please visit esbln.org.