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Hiring workers with disabilities makes sense whether the job market is hot or cold

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The U.S. Department of Labor released its latest report in September, and it was more of the same. Unemployment remained at 3.9 percent, where it has hovered for much of the year, but there was a shift for one key demographic.

After decades of struggle, workers with disabilities are beginning to move the needle, outpacing the employment gains of people without disabilities. In August 2018, the employment-to-population ratio for working-age people with disabilities jumped to 30.2 percent from 29.5 percent the year before. The labor force participation rate for working-age people with disabilities also increased, rising from 32.5 percent in August 2017 to 33 percent in August 2018.

These latest numbers mark 30 months of year-over-year gains in the job market for persons with disabilities, according to the National Trends in Disability Employment report, issued by the Kessler Foundation and the University of New Hampshire.

Progress is being made, and it is long overdue.

With unemployment at an 18-year low, employers are struggling to find qualified talent to fill vacant positions. The workforce shortage has created an economic climate ripe with opportunity for traditionally underemployed groups. Businesses are turning to workers with disabilities to get the job done, and they are stepping up, just like we knew they would.

For nearly a decade, the University of Massachusetts Medical School has collaborated with businesses in Massachusetts to promote the importance of hiring workers for what they bring to the table. This collaboration comes in the form of Work Without Limits, an initiative of the medical school that hosts the annual [Raise the Bar HIRE!](#) Conference and organizes Disability:IN Massachusetts.

Work Without Limits aims to make Massachusetts the first state in the nation where the employment rate of people with disabilities is equal to people without disabilities. The Raise the Bar HIRE! conference, this year co-hosted by the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, is an incubator for this achievement because it brings together stakeholders passionate about, and committed to disability inclusion including businesses and employers, individuals with disabilities and family members, government, and employment service providers.

Fitting held in October during National Disability Employment Awareness Month, the conference will take place at from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Oct. 10 at the Four Points Sheraton in Norwood. National keynote speakers, educational breakout sessions, exhibitors and networking opportunities are among the conference highlights.

Also critical to the Work Without Limits goal is Disability:IN Massachusetts, a network of private- and public-sector employers and an affiliate of the national Disability:IN organization. Disability:IN Massachusetts employer members share best practices to inspire other employers to actively recruit, retain, and promote employees with disabilities not only because it's the right thing to do, but because it makes good business sense, regardless of the unemployment rate.

Workers with disabilities bring countless positive attributes to the job. They're hard-working, taking fewer days off and less sick time than their able-bodied counterparts. They're dedicated and loyal, staying in jobs much longer than job-hopping workers without disabilities, saving employers time and money hiring and training new staff. They're morale boosters, inspiring employees to embrace a teamwork mentality, and their unique perspective drives innovation.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in five Americans have at least one disability. Together, people with disabilities control \$544 billion in disposable income in the U.S. alone, and that doesn't even factor in the friends and family demographic. Hiring workers with disabilities helps businesses build brand value with these influential consumers, and research shows it helps attract prospective employees, too.

Workers with disabilities are smart hires. Still, an outdated societal stigma keeps holding them back. Preconceived, false notions about productivity, legal liabilities, and the cost of accommodations keep businesses from diversifying their intellectual capital.

Even with the modest job gains indicated in the September report, workers with disabilities have not achieved pre-recession employment levels. In 2016, 35.9 percent of people with disabilities were employed, compared to 76.6 percent of the general population—a whopping 40.9 percent employment gap. And if workers with disabilities can secure a job, they have an enormous wage hurdle to clear. The median earnings of people with disabilities was \$22,047 in 2016, compared to \$32,479 for most of the able-bodied population.

We need more businesses to better understand the benefits of a truly inclusive workplace, and membership with Disability:IN Massachusetts is a great place to start. It serves as a pathway for employers from varied industry sectors to connect and share knowledge, information, and best practices. It helps businesses and employers to enhance their organizational capacity and foster inclusive business practices for differently abled persons in the workplace.

Weaving disability inclusion into the fabric of Massachusetts business opens a world of growth, invention, and cultural rewards that are immeasurable. If a low unemployment rate must serve as a conduit for change, so be it, but it's not the real reason why businesses should open their doors to a diverse pool of talent. Hiring workers with disability positively affects the bottom line, no matter if the job market is hot or cold.