



(hire me)



Employing Individuals with Disabilities

It's Good Business Sense



Several years ago, I met a young man with a disability who works at Bank of America. I asked him what his life was like before he got his job, and he said that every day for ten years he sat on his couch and watched television. Now he is a productive member of society and says it's made a huge difference in his quality of life. His story is a powerful illustration of the value of employment for people with disabilities.

As we continue to confront the broader economic challenges of developing our workforce and creating jobs, it is important to remember that Americans with disabilities face disproportionately high rates of unemployment compared with their counterparts without disabilities. *But it doesn't have to stay this way.*

By Jack Markell



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Individuals with disabilities can be a valuable asset to a business's bottom line, and hiring them has proven benefits in the business culture. We've heard this time and time again, but a success story from a small business really drives it home. Acadia Windows and Doors hired one person with a disability to fill a specific business need. Six months later, that employee was promoted and another person with a disability was hired to fill the now-vacant position. Today this thriving small company employs five people who all have disabilities. On top of all that, the vice president says "we are a kinder company now."

Like all governors, I place a high priority on putting the people of my state back to work, including those with disabilities. In July, I became chair of the National Governors Association



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(NGA). As chair, I have the opportunity to choose a policy topic to highlight during my yearlong tenure. With themes of inclusion and self-sufficiency in mind, I created A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities (<http://ci.nga.org/cms/home/1213/index>). This initiative focuses on the role that both state government and business can play in advancing opportunities for individuals with disabilities to be gainfully employed in the competitive labor market. I chose this topic because I believe that people are defined by their ability, not by their disability. And because of that, I think states have a duty to do all they can to see that individuals with disabilities are empowered to achieve their full potential.

Everyone who wants to work and participate fully in society should have the opportunity to do so, but we all know that is often not the case for individuals with disabilities. Their employment outcomes have not improved since 1990, when Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In fact, progress has reversed. According to the Department of Labor, workers with disabilities left the workforce at five times the average rate during the recent recession. The median income for those workers is less

than two-thirds that of other workers. Research indicates that the vast majority of working-age people with disabilities would rather be working than be unemployed and unproductive. Yet, the unemployment rate is persistently higher among people with disabilities. Meanwhile, the United States spends an estimated \$300 billion annually to support people with disabilities who are unemployed.

But where there are challenges, there is also opportunity for growth and improvement. The way forward is through shared responsibility across government and the private sector. This is not something government is doing to business—this is something we must do with business.

The stakeholders are diverse, consisting of individuals and families to advocacy groups and corporate leaders. But we all have a stake in this because we all stand to gain. Advancing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities isn't just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing to do. And it makes good business sense. It's also worth pointing out how proud I am of my fellow governors' work to help people with disabilities become part of the competitive workforce and fully included in society.

But it doesn't stop there. We need everyone to join together in that effort. If we are going to grow our economy and stay competitive globally, we need to draw on the skills and abilities of every segment of our population. States can do a better job streamlining the processes for assessing and training individuals so that employers have a pool of job-ready individuals to draw upon. Individuals with disabilities are part of that pool, and states need to expand their efforts to include them in the mainstream workforce.

Our economy is missing an opportunity by excluding so many people with disabilities from the workforce. At least 54 million Americans—the largest minority population in America—have disabilities. Yet only 20 percent of that population is employed. The fact is, people with disabilities are already a significant population and will continue to be.

On one side, there is an aging workforce that will likely acquire disabilities on the job. Any of us could become one of them. Employers will have to manage that, and they will need a good partner to do so. States, nonprofit organizations, and advocacy organizations can work together to be that partner for business.

On the other side, the next generation will add even more diversity to the workforce. The autism spectrum is being more accurately diagnosed. Veterans are returning with mental and physical challenges. This is a reality for both the public and private sectors. However, this does not need to be a crisis; it is an opportunity to become more inclusive and embrace the diversity presented.

Employers must be comfortable employing people with disabilities in order to harness the talents of the next generation. Savvy business leaders already get it. Walgreens has made two of their distribution centers universally accessible and more than half of their employees have disabilities. Their productivity has increased, and safety has improved for people with and without disabilities.

Large, high-skilled companies, like Bayer, Merck, and JPMorgan Chase,



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have told us how important it is to employ people with disabilities because the diversity is critical to innovation and understanding their consumer base. South Dakota Governor Daugaard, who was raised by two deaf parents, told his fellow governors at the NGA Winter Meeting he believes that people with disabilities are often creative problem solvers and acquire more.

Since the start of my initiative, governors of both parties and business leaders big and small from all over the country have reached out to me expressing their interest and support. While everyone speaks with a difference voice, I've picked up on three key things that consistently pervade our conversations.

- **One**, employers don't care about labels. They care about skills. People with disabilities need to be part of the mainstream workforce, right alongside people without disabilities.
- **Two**, when businesses hire people with disabilities, they benefit in their bottom line and also report improvements in their culture. This is true for small businesses as well as national corporations, as well as the entire spectrum of industries, from manufacturing to entrepreneurship.
- **Three**, the path forward is one of shared responsibility—a path that business, government, and families need to chart together.

Later this year, NGA will release a blueprint capturing best practices we learned over the year and outlining options for carrying the momentum forward for governors and businesses to follow. Much is being learned through our work, but there is much more to learn.

Success depends on the shared passion and commitment that we see across so many diverse sectors of society. It has been inspiring to already see advocates, researchers, businesses, individuals, and government officials across the political spectrum and from all regions of the country come together to support the NGA initiative. Together, we can make a difference so that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else. 