

A man with dark hair, wearing a white dress shirt and a light blue tie, is seated in a wheelchair. He is looking down at a black mobile phone held in his right hand. He has a slight smile on his face. The background consists of light-colored horizontal blinds.

# Disabled and Willing

THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT TURNS 15 THIS YEAR. BUT HOW MUCH HAS REALLY CHANGED WHEN IT COMES TO HIRING PEOPLE WITH MENTAL AND PHYSICAL CHALLENGES?  
BY NANCY HENDERSON WURST

**R**andy Hullender describes himself as "slow." For the past two years, the personable 40-year-old has loaded trucks, handled bulky pallets, and stacked boxes at Habitat International Inc., a major manufacturer of indoor-outdoor rug and golf products. Despite his experience at another carpet company through a state program for people with developmental disabilities, this is Hullender's first full-time job. "It makes me feel great," he says, "to be able to work among friends and earn a real living."

Working with special-needs

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employees can be challenging, especially when they get "sidetracked," admits Habitat team plant coordinator Connie Presnell. But the payoff is worth it. "Randy is here every day regardless of how he feels," she says. "He's consistent. He's always smiling and in a good mood." Presnell says Hullender always gives his best effort, "and that's more than I can say for a lot of able-bodied people."

An estimated 54 million Americans – a full 20 percent of the population – live with disabilities, according to the National Organization on Disability (NOD), which draws support from high-profile advocates like the late Christopher Reeve, *CSI* actor Robert David Hall, who lost both legs in a 1978 highway accident, and former director of homeland security Tom Ridge, who

Almost 90 percent of people with disabilities were not born with them.

has a hearing disability as a result of his military service.

Like Reeve, Hall, and Ridge, almost 90 percent of people with disabilities were not born with them. According to the Brain Injury Association of America, 1.5 million people sustain a traumatic brain injury each year. Someone in the United States has a stroke every 45 seconds. Car accidents, war-related injuries, and loss of mobility as the result of aging jack up the numbers even more. "That's what distinguishes the disability community from other minorities," says Michael R. Deland, NOD president and chairman, who sustained a spinal cord injury while playing football in the Navy. "This is a group that anyone can join in an instant."

Despite celebrity marketing campaigns, improved access, and a decline in blatant discrimination, the employment numbers have hardly budged since the 1990 signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. In last year's NOD-Harris Survey, only 35 percent of people with disabilities reported that they were employed, compared with 78 percent of those without disabilities. Three times as many live in poverty.

Fifteen years after the ADA began breaking down physical barriers, advocates contend that the greatest obstacle to employment is no longer a lack of accessible doors, workstations, and restrooms, but the misguided notion that people with disabilities are inferior to their able-bodied counterparts. "There's still this attitude that people with disabilities are underperformers, that they're unreliable, that the accommodations are expensive, and that they won't pull their

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weight, which will cause other people to work harder. That couldn't be farther from the truth," says Gary Feemster, director of operations for Diversity Services, a New York employment agency known for placing a high number of workers who have disabilities. "Because of all the struggles that disabled workers have been through, all of the hurdles they've had to jump, by

the time they find a job, they tend to be extremely loyal workers. And their retention rate is very high."

At any given time, more than 40 percent of the workers Feemster's company places have disabilities. Workers are placed in jobs ranging from information technology to legal services to Web design. "We staffed for a reality TV show last week," he says. "And

## SHATTERING STEREOTYPES

It's been 60 years since President Harry Truman and Congress designated the first week of October as National Employment the Physically Handicapped Week. In 1988, Congress expanded the program, gave it a new name - National Disability Employment Awareness Month - and encouraged business owners to host people with disabilities in an attempt to better understand the realities of hiring them. Despite such efforts, the myths still exist:

**MYTH:** Employees with disabilities can't measure up.

**FACT:** National studies actually show equal or higher performance ratings. The fallacy stems from a "lack of understanding about what people with disabilities can meaningfully contribute to the workforce," says Michael R. Deland, chairman and president of the National Organization on Disability. "There's a feeling that if you're in a wheelchair or you're blind or you're deaf, that you cannot be a comparable employee to an able-bodied person. In reality, the polling and the numbers show that when people with disabilities get jobs, they are uniformly the most loyal of workers because they're delighted to have the opportunity to work. They're the ones with the fewest sick-leave days and the fewest absences from the job."

**MYTH:** The accommodations will cost too much.

**FACT:** In a 2003 Rutgers University survey of employers, 73 percent of the respondents who had hired someone with a disability said that no workplace changes were needed. When an accommodation was necessary, the average cost was \$500 or less. Small-business tax credits often cover most, if not all, of the expense.

**MYTH:** People with disabilities would rather stay home and collect federal SSI (Supplemental Security Income) benefits.

**FACT:** Two-thirds of unemployed, disabled participants in the 2004 NOD-Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities said they would rather be working. -N.H.W.

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we've even received an order for a nuclear engineer. So there are major corporations, I think, that are becoming more aware that you can't just talk about it. And," he adds, "you don't have to be overly sensitive. We all have similar interests. We all care about

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## BUSINESS

family, our faith, our hobbies. When people realize we're more the same than we are different and focus on ability, not disability, then that starts to help bridge the gap."

Some companies are beginning to recruit people with disabilities in an effort to meet their corporate diversity goals. A few, like Habitat International, give priority to disabled job candidates. Booz Allen Hamilton, a global management and technology consulting firm based in McLean, Virginia, is frequently recognized for hiring special-needs employees. So is LaSalle Bank in Chicago, which partners with 18 social service agencies that help create jobs for disabled workers.

Earlier this year, *Careers and the Disabled* magazine ranked AT&T No. 21 among its list of the nation's top employers for people with disabilities. Employees with special challenges work in customer care, operator services, and communication technology. "Our goals for hiring anybody are to hire the best-qualified individual," says Elizabeth Dixon, assistant director of corporate diversity at AT&T. "Working with people with disabilities has been part of our culture since the days of Alexander Graham Bell, who was not looking to invent the telephone when he did. He was looking to facilitate communication for people who were deaf."

Dixon, who started at AT&T as a stock-and-bond correspondent 28 years ago, relies on adaptive computer software and a guide dog. She is legally blind. "When my job duties changed and there was going to be some difficulty in doing the job, they got the whole committee together and said, 'Well, let's figure out how ... she can do the job.'"

UnumProvident, the country's largest disability insurance provider and No. 17 on the *Careers* list, goes to great lengths to help employees return to work — or remain on the job — after a disability-related absence. Full-time disability management consultants like Judith Barron-Songy offer solutions ranging from foot rests and magnified computer screens to hydraulic sit-and-stand workstations for workers who

"You're not taking more of a risk hiring someone in a wheelchair than someone who's able-bodied," says disability management consultant Judith Barron-Songy.

have undergone spinal surgery. The cost of such adjustments pales compared with the payoff for "helping them be productive and meeting their personal, financial, and work goals," Barron-Songy says. "[Human resources managers] should get past looking at the 'cover' of a person. You're not taking more of a risk hiring someone in a wheelchair than someone who's able-bodied."

There are other, less obvious, reasons to hire people with disabilities, say disability-hiring proponents. It boosts local economies by fostering productive citizens who have money to spend. It reduces dependency on government subsidies and eases taxpayer burden. It lets businesses tap into the growing market of buyers with disabilities, who, according to NOD, represent \$225 billion in annual consumer spending.

Beyond the practical reasons lie those less tangible. Plainly put, it feels good to give people who face obstacles a chance to prove they can not only overcome, but also thrive.

Paul Brinkmann, a disability benefits specialist at UnumProvident, was born with a hearing disability. He reads lips and wears dual headphones to communicate with customers. As he puts it, "My motto is: I have a disability. My disability doesn't have me."

**NANCY HENDERSON WURST** IS THE AUTHOR OF *ABLE! HOW ONE COMPANY'S DISABLED WORKFORCE BECAME THE KEY TO EXTRAORDINARY SUCCESS* (BENBELLA BOOKS, 2005).