Survey Reveals Myths and Misconceptions Abundant Among Hiring Managers About the Capabilities of People Who Are Visually Impaired

Kevin A. Lynch

Despite continued gains in employment, people who are blind remain one of the greatest untapped labor resources in the United States. In November 2012, as we approached the 75th anniversary of the National Industries for the Blind (NIB), we commissioned a study to assess the attitudes and opinions among corporate decision makers regarding the employment of individuals who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision, as defined by JVIB).

The primary objective for the survey was to evaluate attitudes about hiring qualified visually impaired applicants. We wanted to measure perceptions among hiring managers of the quality of employees who are visually impaired and determine how likely it would be for managers to consider hiring visually impaired employees versus those with other disabilities. To read the results of the “NIB Decision-Maker Study,” conducted in November 2012, by the market-and-opinion research firm Repass & Partners, visit: www.nib.org/sites/default/files/NIB%20Hiring%20Manager%20Study%20(Releasable).pdf.

Persistence of Misconceptions
The survey results were disappointing. They indicated a majority of managers mistakenly believed there were few jobs in their organizations that visually impaired people could successfully perform. They also thought it was more expensive to hire someone with impaired vision compared to someone without a disability. The majority of managers made it a lower priority to recruit, train, and retain employees with disabilities than to recruit, train, and retain executives, senior managers, young employees, and minorities. Not surprisingly, the survey results indicated that a hiring manager who personally knew someone with visual impairment was significantly more likely to consider hiring a person with vision loss.

Need to Raise Awareness
After reviewing the survey results, it became clear that we needed to increase awareness about the capabilities of individuals who are blind, the nominal cost of assistive technology, and the positive impact of creating an inclusive and diverse workplace. As a result, NIB developed an education campaign to change perceptions in the business community of the abilities of people who are visually impaired. We want to see companies open up more employment opportunities that can be filled by qualified candidates who are visually impaired.

Given the findings of the survey, we believe it is important for members of the field of visual impairment, when interacting with the business community, to provide education about the value in hiring individuals who are visually impaired. This information is especially needed by smaller businesses, which are less likely to consider hiring employees who are visually impaired, as well as by companies that do not have formal educational programs to encourage the hiring of employees with disabilities.

Arguments in Favor of Hiring People with Visual Impairments
Based on the experience of NIB and our network of associated nonprofit agencies, we know that the opinions and attitudes expressed by the hiring managers who were surveyed are misconceptions. The following
arguments are some of the reasons why people who are visually impaired are as capable as their sighted counterparts and are a valuable resource for strong, competitive businesses.

Many are already employed
Individuals who are visually impaired are productive, skilled, and successfully employed in a wide range of positions at all levels, including production, administration, technical, professional, managerial, and senior executive roles. Visually impaired employees in NIB’s network can be found performing any number of tasks in many sectors of the workforce, including sewing military uniforms, producing office supplies, analyzing budgets, managing projects, solving problems and answering inquiries, directing teams, and leading multimillion-dollar agencies that deliver products and services to government and commercial customers and provide local community outreach.

Assistive technology provides access
Assistive technology continues to close the gap between people who are visually impaired and sighted, and, today, these tools are more sophisticated and cost-effective than ever. Some employers believe that accommodations for people who are visually impaired are too expensive. In reality, these costs are nominal. For certain jobs, only a modest investment in technology is needed for companies to provide “reasonable accommodations” for an employee who is blind, as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. A great many jobs require no additional investment at all.

Career training is available
Training plays an important role in allowing people who are visually impaired to develop the critical skills to secure and maintain employment, and to advance in their careers. NIB’s Business Leaders Program provides training and work experience to encourage professional development among individuals who are visually impaired and prepare them for rewarding, successful careers in business. The program has provided professional training for more than 1,000 people annually since it was launched in 2003. The Contract Management Support (CMS) Training Program, launched in 2009, has provided opportunities for on-the-job training and upward mobility in a high-demand field, and more than 130 participants have secured good-paying, professional contract closeout positions in the public and private sector.

Businesses benefit from diversity
Hiring employees who are visually impaired can positively impact the workplace in many ways. From a business standpoint, employing people with vision loss increases the potential for tax incentives and promotes diversity. In addition, the overall integrity and strength of a company increases through employee morale, inclusion, and fairness in employment hiring practices.

Since 1938, NIB has led the nation in creating jobs for Americans who are visually impaired, helping people to more actively participate in the workforce, advance their careers and lead independent lives through the production and sale of products and services to government and commercial customers. Our view is that by helping to educate the business community about the capabilities of people who are visually impaired in the workplace, managers will hire more candidates who are visually impaired. Individuals and businesses can help change lives by purchasing products and services from NIB’s associated agencies, hiring qualified people who are visually impaired to fill jobs, or partnering with NIB to create more employment opportunities. Our focus is not only on creating jobs, but on developing rewarding careers through challenging, knowledge-based positions in high-energy, quality work environments.

Kevin A. Lynch, M.B.A., president and chief executive officer, National Industries for the Blind, 1310 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314; e-mail: klynch@nib.org.

Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, November-December 2013 ©2013 AFB, All Rights Reserved