

# Workforce Connections

## ‘It’s Just a Difference, Not a Disability’

By Rebecca Patrick

**T**he fight for social equality has taken many forms throughout U.S. history, including the women’s suffrage and civil rights movements to name a few. Their outcomes and many others continue to echo throughout our daily lives. Perhaps nowhere more so than in the workplace, where federal laws ensure the same treatment and opportunities for all people.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 is aimed at making society more accessible to those with disabilities. In the workplace, this means creating job prospects in a suitable environment to accommodate a person’s disability.

What has been the impact of the ADA in Indiana? Discussing how far we’ve come, what employers need to know and where improvements can be made are:

### Participants

- **Jennifer Long** – director of adult services, Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana, Inc., Indianapolis
- **David Mank** – director of the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community at Indiana University, Bloomington
- **Juli Paini** – coordinator, Mayor’s Office of Disability Affairs, Indianapolis

### Basic landscape

“A lot of times when people think of an individual with a disability, they think of a person who uses a wheelchair. They might not necessarily think of an individual with a learning disability or a cognitive disability,” Paini explains. “One of my office’s roles is to help people understand that disability is a very broad thing, and that we need to really be aware of the differences in what people need as they go through that process.”

“Another big part of that education is helping employers understand that a significant disability does not always equate with a significant barrier to employment or a significant employment-related disability,” she adds.

While the ADA has had definite, very positive effects, one thing Paini cautions is not to “get all caught up in its definition of what is a disability. Any good business trains its employees and fosters their development. Making a decision not to do that because they don’t necessarily fall under the definition of a person with a disability under the ADA, it’s just not a helpful business decision to make.”

Another basic, yet meaningful item for employers to consider is how someone with a disability wants to be identified. First-person language is preferred over the common “disabled” term.

“We say ‘a person with a disability,’” Paini distinguishes.

“That’s a good start in identifying who those folks are and working with them and approaching them in an appropriate manner.”

Over the last few decades, the workforce has responded to changes to the family dynamic – from granting paternity leave for new fathers to acknowledging the need to provide care for aging parents. Paini notes, “While we’re not there yet (in terms of recognition), we are



always moving forward in getting people to understand that it's just a difference, not a disability."

## Overcoming perceptions

The panel cited ongoing education and making employers feel comfortable through knowledge as what will propel further inroads in the workplace.

"Sometimes people say that employers' attitudes are the problem; I don't agree with that. It's more a matter of people getting comfortable with something that they've never been exposed to before," Mank contends. He compares adjusting to having a worker with a disability in the office to that of veteran workers co-existing with new hires right out of high school.

Another potential communication barrier stems from a common urge to label people – in this case by what type of disability or injury a person has. "Instead, it's much more helpful to know what will help that person be successful at his or her job," Mank says.

"It could be something as simple as it's really a good idea to write down your expectations for that person for the entire day ... just giving the label doesn't necessarily give the strategy to properly support the person."

One question Paini hears frequently from employers is, "What sort of jobs can people with disabilities do?" Her answer: "What sort of jobs can women do or what sort of jobs can other historically disadvantaged groups do ... I know folks with very significant disabilities who are attorneys and stockbrokers," she shares. "I have a significant disability; I'm an attorney. So it's really no different than people without disabilities."

An additional concern for employers is how their employees will react to hiring a worker with a disability. "It's nice to always remember that the ADA is a civil rights act. It's no different than the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Sometimes I'll put another group into the discussion to see how comfortable they are with that, and then they get it," Paini explains.

"Would you say I can't hire a person who was African-American because all of my employees are white? They might be uncomfortable. Of course you wouldn't. People have told me that (analogy) is a real epiphany."

Paini was also eager to address several typical employer fears about how people with disabilities may impact the bottom line. "They will say that people with disabilities miss more work; studies show that we don't. People with disabilities raise the health insurance costs; studies show that we don't. People with disabilities aren't as productive. Again, studies show that we're just as productive or more productive than individuals without disabilities."

## Connecting candidates with jobs

At Goodwill Industries, which provides job placement assistance to 1,500 employees in 29 counties, participants run the gamut – "from those with the slightest form of a disability to ones with a real severe disability," Long states.

"We have workforce service centers that reach out to employers so there is more job preparedness, readiness and resources. ... It's very encouraging that we're seeing more employers trying to learn more about how to recruit people with disabilities, interview them and really just open their doors," she reports.



For Goodwill and similar services, at the heart of the process is job coaching – most commonly done on a one-on-one basis with the prospective worker.

Long says the job coach first sits down with the person looking for work, as well as his/her spouse, significant other or family members that generally need to be a part of the planning process for that individual. "We develop an employment plan for them. We try to figure out what their interests are. Then, based on that plan, our job coaches go out and job develop – talk to employers about hiring this person based on their interests and abilities," she explains.

When an employer hires that person, the job coach then goes to work with that individual and trains him or her on the job, instead of the employer doing it. "We really educate employers about how work supports can help with that transition for a new employee. The job coaches will stay with them on the job, training for however long it takes – will follow up with them as often as it takes," Long says. "It's about getting the employee to where they feel comfortable with the task and expectations, and introducing the employer to how to work with this particular person's needs."

(It's important to note that while the employee is getting trained, the job coach is actually responsible for the work, ensuring that production or service needs of the employer are met).

Goodwill also has a commercial

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*David Mank  
Indiana Institute on Disability and Community*

services division that plays host to certain types of assembly operations for various contractors. The facility can have up to 300 people working at one time. “It provides paid work experience, and it’s meaningful work to them. We also have case managers that are on site to make sure they’re keeping up with production, getting to work every day, etc,” Long shares.

According to Paini, it’s thanks to groups like Goodwill working closely with businesses that progress has “evolved from a charitable model, where you might go in as a job coach and say, ‘This is the right thing to do. Hire Anna; she needs the work,’” she recounts. “Now we’re coming more from a business perspective and showing what Anna can do.”



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*Juli Paini  
Indianapolis Mayor’s Office of Disability Affairs*

## **Proactive approaches, positive results**

Customized employment, an approach utilized at Goodwill, means individualizing the employment relationship between job seekers and employers to meet the needs of both. Going hand-in-hand with this are programs for resource ownership that provide funds to purchase a tool or whatever is needed in order to obtain that certain job.

“We talk to an employer and say, ‘Tell me about your company, what you do, so that we can think of ways that we could benefit your company by providing an employee who could do that certain task for you,’” Long offers.

“For example, we have a young lady with a severe disability who goes to tanning salons and collects the towels used ... she takes them home and cleans them. We purchased her a washer and dryer, and she does all the cleaning. She then brings them back to the tanning salons. She now has meaningful employment that she never had before.”

Adds Mank, “Sometimes it’s not even helpful to try to convince an employer that they want to hire a person with a disability. What’s relevant here is that Carol has these kinds of talents and things that she’s good at. So it’s not about hiring a person with a disability; it’s about hiring Carol. ... Like any employment relationship, it’s about the match between a person and the work that needs to be completed.”

Another initiative striving to make that connection is Disability Networking Day, a partnership between the city of Indianapolis, businesses and disability-related organizations.

According to Paini, one really positive byproduct she’s seen from this effort is that businesses are now making the connection beyond their employees – to their customers.

“Citizens Gas, (which) participated in Disability Networking Day, had gone through all of the physical features of their building to make sure it was accessible; they had automatic push buttons on their front doors. However, the first time an individual with a disability tried to get in the door, it opened into them. It was a difficult situation,” Paini recounts. “The folks at Citizens Gas said, ‘If this is happening to someone we’ve invited in as a potential employee, how are our customers feeling about this?’”

## **Making it commonplace**

With city resources and organizations like Goodwill Industries and the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community located throughout the state, Mank believes there is a good overall awareness of how employers can reach out to workers with disabilities.

“In most counties, you could find somebody that could help you figure this out,” he determines. “It’s probably a little harder in some of the rural areas ... but I think in most communities if it was of interest to you, you could find someone to help you.”

In fact, Paini wonders if employers don’t get overwhelmed because there’s so much information out there. “They might not understand what customized employment is or what my office does versus another,” she contends.

To that end, the city of Indianapolis is working on a resource guide for employers “to make all that manageable, to have something that isn’t quite as intimidating.” The guide is slated to be ready this fall.

When asked to pinpoint areas in which they want to see strides made, each participant struck on topics of further acceptance.

For Long, more diversification in jobs tops the list. “It’s fairly easy to place people with disabilities

## Employer: Hiring Workers with a Disability is a Win-Win

**F**or World Arts Printing in Spencer, it's the rule rather than the exception. Workers with disabilities are an integral part of the operation, handling a final stage in the printing process for some 250,000 pieces each month.

"Disabled workers should be viewed as viable employees when the skills and abilities are sufficient to satisfy the job requirements," states Philip Gillaspay, World Arts production manager who answered questions via e-mail after being unable to participate in the roundtable discussion. "From an employer's perspective, it is about having a productive employee – regardless of a disability.

**"One of the many services that Stone Belt provides is supported employment. Our Stone Belt consultant matches our business needs with the skills and abilities of their program participants. Stone Belt provides the recruitment, screening, on-the-job training, a job coach and performance evaluations to ensure employer satisfaction — at no cost to the employer."**

**BizVoice®: What specific benefits are realized by hiring workers with a disability?**

**Philip Gillaspay:** "A worker with a disability may have the ability and skills to fulfill a job task requirement within a business operation. The workers employed by our company perform bindery tasks that are fundamental to our printing business. Additionally, taxpayers ultimately experience reductions in the costs of government entitlement programs as an outcome of individuals with disabilities becoming gainfully employed.

"Most importantly, the worker with a disability has an improved quality of life from gainful employment – which offers financial compensation, the chance to increase job skill competencies, plus the opportunity for socialization within the personal community of co-workers."

**BV: What types of positions do they fill at World Arts?**

**PG:** "We print thousands of booklets for manufacturers that must be placed in a Velcro-type pouch and sealed. This involves a tremendous amount of repetitive and familiar handwork. We have two to three part-time supported employment individuals who work two hours per day, five days per week that stuff and seal pouches exclusively. We also employ two disabled workers full-time who primarily stuff and seal pouches, but also participate in collating jobs when the need arises."

**BV: How did you go about finding a qualified employee with a disability?**

**PG:** "For many years, our company has been associated with a wonderful organization called Stone Belt. One of the many services that Stone Belt provides is supported employment. Our Stone Belt consultant matches our business needs with the skills and abilities of their program participants. Stone Belt provides the recruitment, screening, on-the-job training, a job coach and performance evaluations to ensure employer satisfaction – at no cost to the employer. Our two full-time disabled employees were hired as a result of the efforts of Stone Belt supported employment services."

**BV: What are some of the human resources concerns/implications when employing a disabled worker?**

**PG:** "Accommodating limitations is critical and easily – and usually inexpensively – accomplished through workstation modifications. Once this is done, the focus shifts to qualifications and abilities, not limitations. Health conditions and the ability of a disabled worker to communicate problems resulting from a health condition is another concern. Knowing, understanding and establishing a plan of action to deal with any physical limitations or health concerns at the beginning of the employer-disabled employee relationship can easily handle this concern."

**Resource: Philip Gillaspay, World Arts Printing, at [philip@waprinting.com](mailto:philip@waprinting.com)**



into entry-level positions. But, boy we could use employers who are more open to the opportunity of providing more technical and professional positions," she states. "We really need to get the message out there that we need more of these higher-level positions as well because they have the abilities. We need to do a better job of that."

More engaged employers are what Paini hopes for in the near future. "I'd really like to see employers who feel really comfortable – and strong with the information they have – go out and recruit workers (with disabilities) on their own," she offers.

Mank adds, "It's not about the disability community saying

that employing people with disabilities needs to happen; it's really about people who are hiring saying, 'We need this.' "

### INFORMATION LINK

**Resources: Jennifer Long, Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana, Inc., at (317) 524-4335**

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