

Opinion
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Bloomberg

Disabled People Can Help Ease the Shortage of Workers

In a tight labor market, overlooking those who can work but face obstacles comes at a steep cost to the economy.



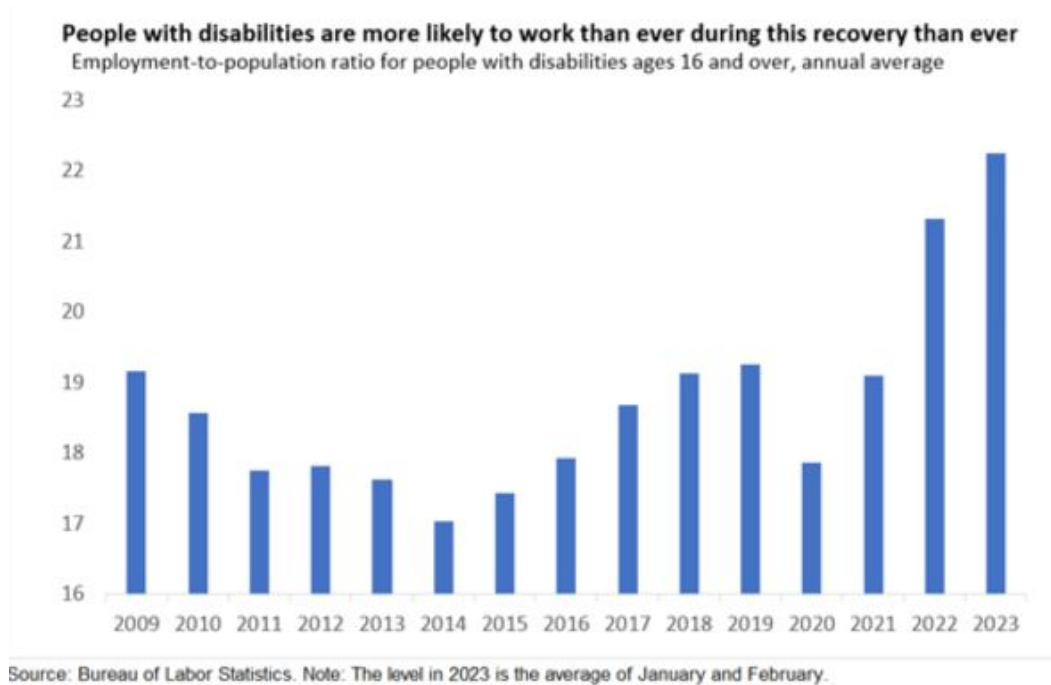
It's a hot labor market. *Photographer: Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images*

By Claudia Sahm

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At a time when some 10 million US jobs are unfilled, Covid-19 still lingers and the workforce is aging at an alarming rate, it's never been more urgent for employers to strengthen their resolve to hire and retain workers with disabilities. Progress is happening, with the latest monthly jobs report showing

that the employment rate is at a high of 22% among disabled adults. Still, that is only about one-third of the national average. Far too often, the potential contributions from the disabled are undervalued and underutilized. In a tight labor market like the one we have now, that comes at a steep cost to the economy.

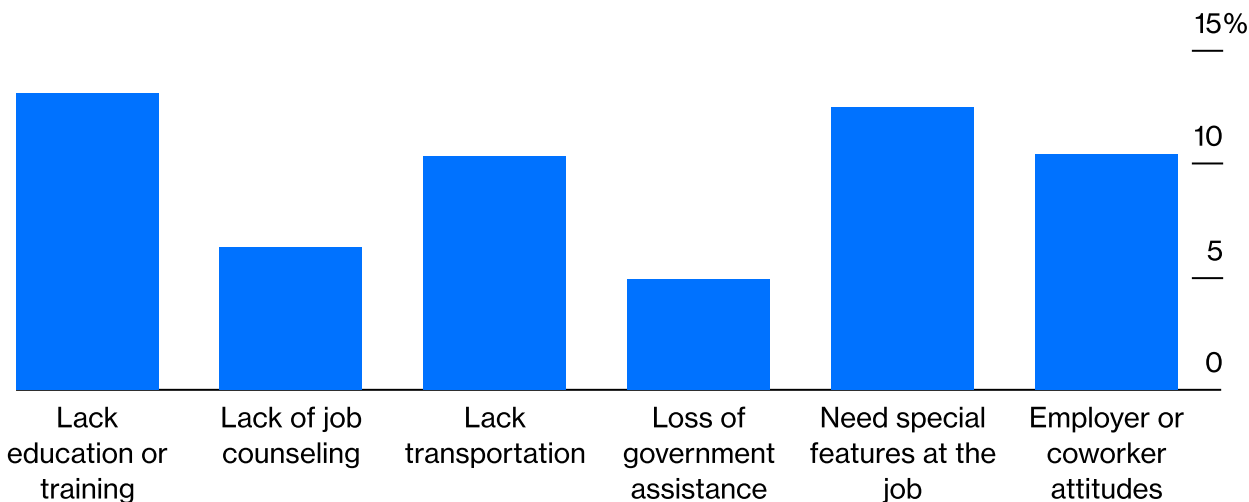


The vast majority who are not in the labor force have worked in the past, and if given the opportunity and proper support, many would do so again. The labor force with a disability increased by more than one million people over the past three years to nearly 8 million. Long Covid, which the Department of Health and Human Services has legally designated a disability, partly accounts for the increase. So does the aging of the workforce since the onset of disabilities is far more common at older ages. The pandemic has shown how hard it is to bring older workers back after they have left and how that contributes to labor shortages.

Staying on the job or getting a new one can be challenging for disabled persons. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that among non-employed disabled individuals, the barriers are varied, including physical obstacles such as transportation, gaps in necessary skills and a lack of acceptance at work. Disabled individuals must navigate those challenges in addition to managing their health condition. It's possible to do so, but success requires a commitment from employers, co-workers and community networks.

Varied Reasons

The disabled face a wide range of barriers to working, but they are surmountable



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

The sample is of disabled persons who are not employed and aged 16 to 64. More than one response is possible. The chart excludes own disability (81.5%) and other (17.5%)

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Attitudes about disability present a particularly difficult challenge. More than 30 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act prohibited discrimination against individuals with disabilities, they still face stereotypes, prejudice and, in some cases, discrimination in the workplace. In a study in 2017, Mason Ameri, a professor at Rutgers University, and his co-authors sent resumes with identical characteristics, except some disclosed a disability of either Asperger's Syndrome or spinal cord injury. Those resumes received 26% fewer calls for an interview than resumes that did not include a disability. And those with a job often do not get the support they need. Only about half received an accommodation for their disability, even though reasonable ones are required under ADA and significantly raise the chance of retention.

In addition, the likelihood of an accommodation depends on personality, creating another layer of inequity. Nicole Maestas, a health care policy professor at Harvard University, and her colleagues found that older workers are more likely to receive an accommodation if they were high in assertiveness and open communication, according to the Big Five personality test. While not

surprising, access to legal protection and support in one's job should not depend on how well disabled workers can advocate for themselves. Employers should extend the same protections to all workers. It's both the law and good business practice.

Accommodating a disabled worker does not typically mean radical new tools or work arrangements. Telework creates more opportunities for disabled workers, as [Bloomberg News reported](#). It helps those for whom travel to work is a logistical or a physical barrier. In 2019, before the pandemic, disabled workers were more likely to [do some work from home](#), though only marginally so, 26% versus 23% for the non-disabled. By 2021, these rates were the same at 31%. A similar pattern exists for flexible schedules or part-time work. Adjustments may indeed need to occur for a disabled worker, but many of them are straightforward and more common now. It's harder to argue now that telework is not a reasonable accommodation.

Employers must receive training on the legal requirements of the ADA, but that does not give them practical tools. A frequent barrier to hiring disabled and retaining workers is not knowing how to handle the needs of a disabled worker, [according to a survey of human resource managers](#). Managers need effective, practical tools that are in place before hiring or a disabling health event occurs.

Employers have work to do, and so do policymakers. Social Security Disability Insurance is crucial for individuals with severe disabilities who cannot work, even with accommodations. However, its requirements also strongly disincentivize work and re-entry to the workforce. David Autor and Mark Duggan, economics professors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Maryland, [proposed adding a layer](#) of employer-funded disability insurance as a first line of defense against less severe disabling health events. The goal is to give the worker time to recover and return to work or find new employment. After that, SSDI would be an option. The Social Security Administration has attempted, without success, to encourage recipients to find work again, but that's not easy after years away from a job.

During the pandemic, many employers made previously unthinkable changes to accommodate their workers' needs, including working from home. These adjustments proved beneficial. That's the same kind of thinking we should extend to disabled workers. Meeting people where they are is critical to a productive, equitable workforce.



Above all else, the best thing for individuals with disabilities who want to work is a strong labor market. When employers are short of workers, as they are now, they will be more flexible in hiring and retention. And the pandemic showed that's possible, as many employers made previously unthinkable changes to accommodate their workers' needs, including working from home. These adjustments proved beneficial. That's the same kind of thinking we should extend to disabled workers who are unemployed. Meeting people where they are is critical to a productive, equitable workforce.

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