

National Disability Employment Awareness Month



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October was National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). In 1945, Congress enacted a law declaring the first week in October as “National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week.” Today, that title would not make it to print without someone objecting about it not being politically correct. Who knew that Congress had the foresight to recognize us for the past 66 years?

Through the years, the title has changed to reflect the changes in the attitudes of society and the law. The word “physically” was removed in 1962 to acknowledge individuals with all types of disabilities, their employment needs and the many contributions made by employees with disabilities. Then, in 1988, Congress lengthened the time from a week to a month and changed the name to the “National Disability Employment Awareness Month.” When the Office of Disability Employment Policy was established in 2001, it assumed the responsibility for this event and has been promoting the idea ever since. Times sure have changed, especially since the enactment of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

For those of us with severe disabilities lucky enough to have a job, chances are we weren’t hired strictly because of our qualifications. We were hired to a great extent because of the inclusive attitudes of someone that saw our abilities rather than our disabilities.

Someone gave us a chance to prove we are capable of productive employment. We all have stories to tell about our education, our resumes and our futile attempts to land any job. No matter how well educated, how much predisability experience we might have, it all comes down to someone giving us a chance to prove ourselves.

In my case, it took more than 30 years to land a “real” job. I went through three periods of getting an education in three different career fields, but I had very little work experience. I worked some here and there, mostly part-time or temporary, whatever I could get that would not jeopardize my disability income. But interview after interview, the excuse was always the same; I had too little actual work experience. Without a job, I could not get experience and without experience, I could not get a job. Does that sound familiar? The truth was that those who were interviewing could not get past my disability and summarily dismissed me as not being a viable candidate for the position. I often knew as soon as I went in the room that it was a lost cause. Every time, I would stick it out and complete the interview knowing my time and theirs was wasted.



Finally, after my third round of getting an education and still no employment, I decided that I was destined to sit on the sidelines and wait for that disability check every month for the rest of my life. I was tired of trying to become gainfully employed and self-sufficient. I was merely “a disability with an education” Then, it happened.

I was attending a disability conference when I met two other attendees at one of the workshops. They were at the conference searching for “an education with a disability.” They suggested that I apply for the position. With no expectations whatsoever, I applied and, within a week, I finally had my first real job. It was the inclusive attitudes of those individuals that allowed them to recognize the value of my abilities rather than only seeing my disabilities. I was given a chance to prove my self-worth.

That was six years ago, and I celebrate my start date every year as my “worth day” because that was the day that I finally felt like I was doing something worthwhile. I was contributing to my family, to work, to society and even paying taxes, just like everyone else. I was no longer just a disability with an education. I never imagined that a simple change in attitude could change one’s life so dramatically.

Today, America celebrates October as NDEAM and we appreciate the wisdom Congress showed in 1945. The [Office of Disability Employment Policy](#) is currently the agency that oversees the NDEAM initiative. The Office offers a variety of resources to help you learn more about disabilities inclusion.

Also, Oct. 19, 2011, (the third Wednesday in October) was Disability Mentoring Day (DMD) sponsored by the [American Association of People with Disabilities](#). DMD is a nationwide effort to promote career development for students with disabilities through hands-on career exploration. Students with disabilities are paired with employee mentors according to their career of interest. The students experience a typical day on the job and learn what it would be like if they pursued a career in that particular field.

I hope you joined in the celebration by participating in the ongoing activities in your community. Employers, schools and organizations throughout the state and the nation are encouraged to participate. Remember, disability inclusion is an attitude, so keep it positive!