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## Attitudinal Barriers for People with Disabilities

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In the “Quagmire” episode of the television series *The X-Files*, Agent Mulder, discussing *Moby Dick*’s Captain Ahab, tells Scully he always wished he had a physical disability. His reasoning: because society doesn’t expect much from people with disabilities, he wouldn’t have to work so hard to prove himself. Without a disability, Mulder would be considered lazy or a failure if he didn’t work, whereas with a disability, he would have an excuse for slacking and would be called “courageous” for merely holding a job, let alone succeeding.

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The fact that a respected character on one of America's most popular television shows expressed this viewpoint exemplifies the rampant attitudinal barriers hindering people with disabilities in or trying to enter the workforce.

People with disabilities face many barriers every day—from physical obstacles in buildings to systemic barriers in employment and civic programs. Yet, often, the most difficult barriers to overcome are attitudes other people carry regarding people with disabilities. Whether born from ignorance, fear, misunderstanding or hate, these attitudes keep people from appreciating—and experiencing—the full potential a person with a disability can achieve.

The most pervasive negative attitude is focusing on a person's disability rather than on an individual's abilities. A lawyer is effective if he or she has a solid grasp of law and can present a complete case before a jury or judge; that the lawyer accesses law books through a Kurzweil reader because he or she is blind is immaterial to the job skill. A rancher is effective if she or he feeds the cattle and mends the fences; that the rancher with paraplegia operates a cattle feeder system in the bed of a truck via a rod from the cab or rides an all-terrain vehicle to reach fences is immaterial to the job skill. A stocker in a factory is effective if he or she packages the proper number of items in each bin; that the stocker, because of a developmental disability that limits attention span, uses a counting device is not only immaterial to the job skill, but can make—and has made—that person the most accurate stocker on the factory floor.

Agent Mulder expresses a more insidious attitude—that society doesn't expect people with disabilities to perform up to standard, and when people with disabilities do, they are somehow courageous. This attitude has the effect of patronizing people with disabilities, usually relegating them to low-skill jobs, setting different job standards (sometimes lower standards which tend to alienate co-workers, sometimes higher standards to prove they cannot handle a job), or expecting a worker with a disability to appreciate the opportunity to work instead of demanding equal pay, equal benefits, equal opportunity and equal access to workplace amenities.

## Types of Attitudinal Barriers

People with disabilities encounter many different forms of attitudinal barriers.

- Inferiority

Because a person may be impaired in one of life's major functions, some people believe

that individual is a “second-class citizen.” However, most people with disabilities have skills that make the impairment moot in the workplace.

- Pity

People feel sorry for the person with a disability, which tends to lead to patronizing attitudes. People with disabilities generally don’t want pity and charity, just equal opportunity to earn their own way and live independently.

- Hero worship

People consider someone with a disability who lives independently or pursues a profession to be brave or “special” for overcoming a disability. But most people with disabilities do not want accolades for performing day-to-day tasks. The disability is there; the individual has simply learned to adapt by using his or her skills and knowledge, just as everybody adapts to being tall, short, strong, fast, easy-going, bald, blonde, etc.

- Ignorance

People with disabilities are often dismissed as incapable of accomplishing a task without the opportunity to display their skills. In fact, people with quadriplegia can drive cars and have children. People who are blind can tell time on a watch and visit museums. People who are deaf can play baseball and enjoy music. People with developmental disabilities can be creative and maintain strong work ethics.

- The Spread Effect

People assume that an individual’s disability negatively affects other senses, abilities or personality traits, or that the total person is impaired. For example, many people shout at people who are blind or don’t expect people using wheelchairs to have the intelligence to speak for themselves. Focusing on the person’s abilities rather than his or her disability counters this type of prejudice.

- Stereotypes

The other side of the spread effect is the positive and negative generalizations people form about disabilities. For example, many believe that all people who are blind are great musicians or have a keener sense of smell and hearing, that all people who use wheelchairs are docile or compete in paralympics, that all people with developmental disabilities are innocent and sweet-natured, that all people with disabilities are sad and bitter. Aside from diminishing the individual and his or her abilities, such prejudice can set too high or too low a standard for individuals who are merely human.

- Backlash

Many people believe individuals with disabilities are given unfair advantages, such as easier work requirements. Employers need to hold people with disabilities to the same job standards as co-workers, though the means of accomplishing the tasks may differ from person to person. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not require special privileges for people with disabilities, just equal opportunities.

- Denial

Many disabilities are “hidden,” such as learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities,

epilepsy, cancer, arthritis and heart conditions. People tend to believe these are not bona fide disabilities needing accommodation. The ADA defines “disability” as an impairment that “substantially limits one or more of the major life activities.”

Accommodating “hidden” disabilities which meet the above definition can keep valued employees on the job and open doors for new employees.

- Fear

Many people are afraid that they will “do or say the wrong thing” around someone with a disability. They therefore avert their own discomfort by avoiding the individual with a disability. As with meeting a person from a different culture, frequent encounters can raise the comfort level.

## Breaking Down Barriers

Unlike physical and systematic barriers, attitudinal barriers that often lead to illegal discrimination cannot be overcome simply through laws. The best remedy is familiarity, getting people with and without disabilities to mingle as coworkers, associates and social acquaintances. In time, most of the attitudes will give way to comfort, respect and friendship.

## Tips for interacting with people with disabilities:

- Listen to the person with the disability. Do not make assumptions about what that person can or cannot do.
- When speaking with a person with a disability, talk directly to that person, not through his or her companion. This applies whether the person has a mobility impairment, a mental impairment, is blind or is deaf and uses an interpreter.
- Extend common courtesies to people with disabilities as you would anyone else. Shake hands or hand over business cards. If the person cannot shake your hand or grasp your card, they will tell you. Do not be ashamed of your attempt, however.
- If the customer has a speech impairment and you are having trouble understanding what he or she is saying, ask the person to repeat rather than pretend you understand. The former is respectful and leads to accurate communication; the latter is belittling and leads to embarrassment.
- Offer assistance to a person with a disability, but wait until your offer is accepted before you help.
- It is okay to feel nervous or uncomfortable around people with disabilities, and it’s okay to admit that. It is human to feel that way at first. When you encounter these situations, think “person” first instead of disability; you will eventually relax.

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