

# Windmills Overcoming Fear and Misperception

The Reality of Working With People With Disabilities

by **Richard Pimentel**

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*Working with People with Disabilities*  
Written by Richard Pimentel**

# Understanding Disability

## What is the Definition of Disability?

This would seem to be a simple question to answer. Instead, it is one of the most difficult. The Americans with Disabilities Act has one definition. Social Security has a different one. The medical profession has its own rating system. State vocational rehabilitation has very narrow and restrictive standards. The disability movement has a very broad and inclusive definition. Remarkably, the most useful definitions of disability seem to be more philosophical than they are legal.

It is important to keep in mind that whichever definition is used, one thing remains consistent: persons with disabilities have a significantly higher unemployment rate than any other large minority group. Once employed, they also have a significantly higher rate of being and remaining underemployed.

In all likelihood, your organization has its own definition of disability that is used either for eligibility, record keeping or delivery of services. It is important that you adhere to that definition. However, it is also important that you begin to develop an understanding of disability beyond the legal and entitlement terminology.

## How to View a Disability

As a job developer, I found two ways of looking at disabilities to be most helpful to me.

### 1. Impairment Vs Disability

This view sees **impairments** as residing within the **individual**. So someone with paraplegia might have the impairment of being unable to walk. This person would most likely use a wheelchair for mobility. This view also sees **disability** as residing within the **environment**. Thus a person who uses a wheelchair is impaired but does not become disabled until he or she is confronted with a barrier such as steps or stairs or the absence of a ramp. Disabling factors in the environment can turn an impairment into a disability. They can be physical, as the case of an employer with a narrow door; or attitudinal, as in the case of an employer with a narrow mind.

This view of disabilities can be especially helpful to you since it is a constant reminder that finding a work environment that is both physically and attitudinally barrier free reduces the impact of a participant's restrictions. It also is a reminder that when faced with a restriction that prevents a participant from being

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considered or hired in a job, there are *two* options. One, work to change the impairment of the participant in some way; or two, work to change the barrier in the environment.

*The environment is far easier to change than the participants are.*

**2. Any physical or mental limitation that would limit or be perceived to limit the participant's ability to participate in the hiring process; or if hired, to satisfactorily perform the duties of the job.**

This perspective has been very helpful to me because it reminds me that I must stay focused on those limitations that could interfere with the interview, evaluation, hiring and performance of my participant. It also prompts me to keep in mind that these limitations can be real or perceived. For example, a participant who is blind may have serious limitations working in the field of data input. These limitations could cause him or her to not be considered for the job. Yet with new technology and with proper training and skills, it is quite possible that this participant would have no serious limitations. However, because of an employer's or a placement professional's belief that these limitations exist, the participant might not be referred by a placement professional or considered by an employer for an interview.

The benefit of this viewpoint is that it allows the placement professional to:

- Anticipate the real or imagined problems that a participant with a disability might face in his or her job search.
- Develop a strategy for removing or solving the *real* ones and clarifying and overcoming the *perceived* ones.

The ability to do this, in most cases, can be the difference between a successful job search and a failure. The successful placement of persons with disabilities is more than simply matching a participant's qualifications to job openings and making a referral. Consider the word **ADEPT**:

**A**nticipate barriers, problems and employer concerns.

**D**evelop solutions and strategies.

**E**ducate participants to effectively present themselves to the employer.

**P**repare the employer to effectively evaluate the applicant.

**T**ransition the participant into a successful employee through retention strategies.

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If this seems like it is also the basics of good job placement, you are right! This is fundamental. However in a hot economy, working with heavy caseloads, it is easy to get away from fundamentals.

*Working with persons with disabilities  
requires us to be ever vigilant  
and to be fundamentally sound  
in our placement efforts.*

## **Attitude Makes a Difference**

The late Evan Kemp was the chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and one of the most influential political leaders in the history of the disability movement. He was more than just partly responsible for the passage of The Americans with Disabilities Act. Not long after the Act was passed, a reporter asked him whether he believed that The Americans with Disabilities Act would remove all the barriers faced by persons with disabilities. He replied that it would remove many physical barriers but ultimately the most serious barriers that persons with disabilities currently face and will face in the future are attitudinal. No law can remove them.

The biggest challenge that I faced in beginning to work with persons with disabilities was not learning about their medical conditions and restrictions. It was not keeping on top of the rapid and massive progress that is being made in devices, aids, and technology. It was not learning and staying up to date with the law. It was not understanding employers' fears, concerns and attitudes about persons with disabilities. The biggest challenge that I faced, and still face every day, was my own attitude about persons with disabilities. When I had a caseload, I went to work each morning with the sobering thought that I was going to assist persons who had impairments to find and retain employment...and that if I was not attentive to my own prejudices, I might be the biggest barrier to employment that they would face that day.

This is not to say I had a bad attitude towards persons with disabilities. The interesting thing about attitudes towards this group is that with a few isolated exceptions, people do not knowingly discriminate against persons with disabilities. The attitude that persons with disabilities face is more one of fear and confusion than distrust and dislike. It is based more on myth and bias than on loathing and suspicion.

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What I learned is that everyone reacts to persons with disabilities because we react to disabilities themselves. These reactions cannot help but influence the way we perceive people and thus the decisions we make about them. The following are what I consider the two most important reasons for these reactions and what I believe an employment professional can learn from them. We react to disabilities because of:

## **1. What we do not know.**

There are very few experts on any one disabling condition and no experts on all of them. Yet everyone has beliefs about some disability. We formed many of these ideas and beliefs when we were much younger. The problem is that much of what we believe about disabilities and persons with disabilities is not accurate today and may never have been accurate. For instance, many people believe that persons who are deaf have balance problems and should not work at heights or use a ladder because it will cause them to become dizzy or fall. This belief may be true for some persons who are deaf but not for all. When an employment professional or employer makes generalizations about these things, they limit the opportunities of persons with disabilities.

As an employment professional, I am sure that you would never generalize about the employability of a person by using beliefs about their race or gender...so too with disabilities. When I work with a person with a disability, I assume that what I think I know about the impairment might be wrong, or at least may not apply to this person. Each person is unique and identical impairments may affect individuals in unique ways. The best knowledge comes from talking to the individual about what he or she can do and how the impairment affects his or her ability to do a job.

*Question everything you think you know about disability.*

Look at each individual to see how the disability may impact upon him or her. Never make an employment or referral decision based only on what you know about a general condition or restriction.

## **2. What we do know.**

About twenty years ago, I was doing job development in Portland, Oregon. I had assisted a veteran with a below-the-knee right leg amputation obtain employment as an intrastate truck driver for a wholesale food distributor. Not long after I made the placement I received a call from the employer. The employer was very pleased with the man and called to ask me if I had any other veterans just like him

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that I could send over. I thought about it and to my surprise I did have another veteran with a right leg amputation.

I told the employer that I did have one but I was not going to send him. The employer became upset and asked why, and I told him that it was because the other participant did not want to be a truck driver and would probably make a lousy one. I explained that it was not the fact that the first participant had an amputated leg that made him a good employee. It was because he was eager, smart, hard working, dependable and wanted to be a truck driver. I told him I had a number of participants like that and he could have all of them.

One of the most difficult attitudes for persons with disabilities to overcome is the belief that one experience with a person with a disability will give an employer or employment professional great insight into what everyone with that impairment is like. It is not true for race or gender or ethnicity. Why then should it be true for disability?

As a job developer I must admit that when an employer called me and was happy with a hire and wanted someone else with that disability to work in the same job category, I was tempted. Yet I knew that I would be setting up my participant for failure if he or she was not right for the job. A disability is not a job qualification. I also knew that to stay silent and make a referral was to lend credibility to an error of thinking. Sure, the employer liked my participant, hired him and wanted another. But what if my truck driver had not been a good employee? What if he had been a terrible employee? Would that employer have reasoned that the amputation had nothing to do with the poor job performance and some day give another applicant who was an amputee a chance? Would the employer simply assume that persons with artificial legs do not make good truck drivers because they tried one once? You know the answer.

*We must take every opportunity  
to educate the employer to think  
of persons with disabilities  
as individuals.*

It is too easy for an employment professional, as well as an employer, to believe that they are matching a disability to a job rather than a person with a disability to a job. As employment professionals, we must take every opportunity to educate the employer to think of persons with disabilities as individuals and not make the mistake that was made with so many women and racial and ethnic minorities. There was a time when the belief that women and racial minorities were only suited for certain jobs was commonplace. Thankfully, these beliefs about race and gender are in rapid decline. Unfortunately, this belief still exists for many persons with disabilities. Even today, there are employment professionals and employers who attempt to match a disability to a job. This creates clustering, where persons who use wheelchairs are only considered to work on computers, persons

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retardation are limited to food service or janitorial positions, and persons who are blind are trained in assembly.

This is limiting and it is wrong. Moreover, it is detrimental not only to those persons with disabilities who are not hired because they may not fit the stereotype, but also to those who are hired. If an employer believes an employee is doing a good job because a proper match was made between the job duties and the disability rather than a good match of the person and the job, what is the motivation to ever promote that employee? There is none. In fact, there is a strong argument for leaving that employee in that job. This is one of the reasons for lack of upward mobility for employees who have disabilities. By embracing this attitude, the employment professional not only hurts his or her participants but also harms the program or agency by limiting salary increases, career growth, promotion and retention of participants. Job placement without salary growth, career development, promotion and retention is not worth the taxpayer's money. These are the new standards in training and placement. Persons with disabilities have the potential of being one of the most successful groups that your organization works with.

When I did job placement, one of the sayings that I had framed on my wall was:

*There are no good jobs for persons with disabilities.  
But there are persons with disabilities  
who are good for jobs.*

Evan Kemp was right. No one can legislate attitudes. However, we all can seek to understand our own attitudes as well as those of others and evaluate whether these attitudes are helpful or hurtful to our goals. Understanding the role that attitudes play in the employment and unemployment of persons with disabilities is the first vital step of an employment professional who seeks to work with this population.

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## Points to Remember:

- I. **Impairment is within the individual. Disability is within the environment.**  
*Remember that the extent of disability of any participant can depend on your creativity in the job search and your ability to educate and communicate with the employer about identifying and removing barriers.*
- II. **Perceived barriers to employment must be taken as seriously as real ones.**  
*Anticipate both the real barriers that the participant will face as well as those that may be beliefs and concerns without merit. Develop a strategy with the participant to address both.*
- III. **Question everything you think you know about disabilities.**  
*Find out how your participant's impairment affects him or her. Do not generalize. Never make a referral or job development decision based only on a belief about a condition. Research and find out the most up-to-date information when necessary.*
- IV. **Never try to match a job to an impairment.**  
*A disability is not a qualification. Sell the person, not the disability. There are no good jobs for persons with disabilities. There are only persons with disabilities who are good for jobs.*
- V. **Look to your own attitudes before attempting to correct the attitudes of others.**  
*It is only by being open and learning about our own attitudes that we can recognize and work with the attitudes of others. Many persons with disabilities are not unemployed only because of the restrictions that they have, they are unemployed because of the restrictions that we put upon them. Never let your attitude be someone's disability.*

# What Is the Windmills Training Program?

**Windmills** is an attitudinal training program developed by the California Governor's Committee for Employment of Persons with Disabilities. Often times, individuals stereotypically respond to individuals with disabilities without regard to what the disability truly is, how it was derived and the impact of misperceptions.

Many companies would like to employ persons with disabilities but find that fears, biases and myths create barriers in the hiring process. **Windmills** focuses on attitudes and human factors, as well as issues including legal requirements and accommodation. The modules primarily consist of exercises relevant to the everyday world of work. Although federal and state laws prohibit employment discrimination against persons with disabilities, attitude often remains as the most significant barrier to employment.

The curriculum consists of 11 training modules that use participation and discovery as learning vehicles. Through this process, individuals are able to recognize their own perception of persons with disabilities, where these perceptions originated and how these perceptions affect behavior in the workplace.

The program is designed to help supervisors feel more confident in working with and supervising persons with disabilities.

If you are interested in obtaining more information, please contact Milt Wright & Associates, Inc.

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