



Attitudinal Barriers

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 toward people with disabilities. Whether from ignorance, fear, misunderstanding or hate, these attitudes keep people with disabilities from achieving their full potential. 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.*
- *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 has a developmental disability that limits attention span and uses a counting device is not only immaterial to the job skill, but has made that person the most accurate stocker on the factory floor.*

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 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 daily 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 when ability is not evident. 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 affects other senses, abilities and traits, or that the total person is impaired. For example, many people shout at individuals 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 disabilities 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 and 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 they will “do or say the wrong thing” around someone with a disability. They therefore avert their own discomfort by avoiding the individual. As with meeting a person from a different culture, frequent encounters can raise the comfort level.
