

DISABLED AMERICANS WELCOME OPPORTUNITY FOR WORK



Americans with disabilities tend to lose their jobs six times faster than those Americans without disabilities. Another alarming statistic is that fewer than one in five Americans with disabilities work according to the Department of Labor. Joyce Bender, the founder and CEO of a Moon employment firm, helps those with disabilities in this country find jobs. Bender is also the chair of the American Association of People with Disabilities. For 16 years prior to being diagnosed with epilepsy, Bender worked as a headhunter. She was diagnosed with epilepsy and hearing loss after suffering a seizure and fall that fractured her skull back in 1995 while at a movie theater. The firm that Bender runs is called the Bender Consulting Services Inc. "It's an easy out for a lot of employers," she said. "I can't tell you how many times I approached companies with a candidate, and they'd say, 'We'd love to hire them, if they only had more experience.' Well, it's hard to get experience if no one will hire you." In an effort to battle the problem, Bender began the co-op program four years ago with the hiring of people who have disabilities and contracting them out to Bayer. Over the course of a year, Bender and her staff trains the recruits in an effort for them to take over jobs at companies such as Bayer. After a worker completes the program, Bender is ready to plug in another worker. Greg Babe, the president and CEO of Bayer Corp. and Bayer MaterialScience, had the following to say: "To us, it's nothing more than a solid business plan. What more do you want than employees who are capable, reliable and loyal?" Babe said. What is now known as Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Highmark began working with Bender in the 1990s, said Nan DeTurk. DeTurk is the executive vice president at Highmark and also the company's chief administrative and financial officer. "A lot of companies don't want to take a bet on the disabled, and that's a shame. We view it as an opportunity. We can either hire this individual, or we have helped build up someone's resume," DeTurk said. Less than 19 percent of close to 27 million working-age people with disabilities were working in the month of September according to statistics released by the Labor Department. That number can be compared to the 65 percent without disabilities who held jobs in September. "To the extent that there is generally some discrimination against the disabled, it wouldn't surprise me that discrimination rears its head more when employers have to make really tough decisions about layoffs and who to hire," said Heidi Shierholz, a labor economist with the Washington-based Economic Policy Institute. "It's not like we've solved all our problems," Bender said. "But we are starting to break down barriers."

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