

How Employers Gain Access to Talent with Brain Injuries

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2/6/2012

By Stephenie Overman

Companies must reach out to people with disabilities to make sure such individuals know they are welcome, experts say. Some of the people with in-demand workplace skills who need certain accommodations are people—including military veterans—with traumatic brain injury (TBI).

Northrop Grumman Corp. prides itself on being “disability friendly, military friendly,” said Kia Silver Hodge, PHR, corporate manager of diversity recruitment programs in Falls Church, Va. “We spend money to make sure people know they are welcome here,” she told *SHRM Online*. “We like to think we have a higher level of sensitivity,” she added, especially to people with disabilities such as TBI—brain damage that is suffered as a result of war, stroke or accident.

It’s important to show that kind of sensitivity from the very beginning, Hodge added, because “many people are fearful to express what they need. A lot of people would rather keep their disability to themselves. That stigma is still attached. People don’t feel comfortable.”

And that’s unfortunate, she said, because Northrop Grumman is “looking for talent.”

Duane Hardesty of Northrop Grumman said he finds that applicants with disabilities “are reluctant to ask for anything” during job interviews. “They are still a little skeptical. They don’t want to do anything that will jeopardize getting the position,” he said.

Hardesty is a retired Army colonel who is outreach manager for the aerospace and defense company’s **Operation IMPACT** (which stands for Injured Military Pursuing Assisted Career Transition). The program provides transition support and employment to service members who have been severely injured.

Beth Loy, principal consultant for the **Job Accommodation Network** (JAN), has urged employers to emphasize from the very beginning of the recruiting process that they are willing to hire people with disabilities. JAN is a service of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy.

Loy suggested advertising in places that are geared to people with disabilities and building relationships with disabilities-related organizations. “When you have a position that is available, try to reach those groups,” she told *SHRM Online*.

See the [featured resources section](#) of [SHRM’s Disability Employment Resource Page](#) to find such organizations.

Differing Injuries, Differing Needs

Employers considering hiring people with TBI need to understand that the severity of injuries ranges widely, Loy said. “There may be visual impairment or mobility impairment. There could be memory deficit or difficulty handling stress or difficulty working with supervisors and other employees.”

For many people, TBI brings on aphasia, a communication disorder that impairs their ability to process language, noted Ellayne Ganzfried, executive director of the [National Aphasia Association](#) in New York. Those with the disorder might have trouble speaking and they might seem as if they don’t understand things they hear or read.

However, “aphasia does not impair intelligence,” Ganzfried said. “You still retain the essence of who you are.” She said people with the disorder can perform a variety of tasks such as data entry, online research or bookkeeping.

In all cases, Loy recommended, “focus on the job and the individual doing essential functions of the jobs. You’re going to get a wide variety of individuals with different strengths and weaknesses.”

Interviewing Tips

As much as possible, an interview with an individual who has TBI “should be like any other interview situation,” Loy said, with the interviewer stressing the tasks that are essential to the position.

At Northrop Grumman, Hodge said, the conversation revolves around “How can we help you have the resources you need?”

Ganzfried said people with aphasia often need a quiet room and extra time to respond.

“Keep your voice at a normal level,” she explained. Resist the urge to complete their sentences. Keep communication simple.

“Sometimes people do better with yes or no questions,” she said. Other means of communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, can be helpful and “some people need paper and pencil to write a key word ... allow them to utilize whatever accommodation they might need.”

As outreach manager for Northrop Grumman’s Operation IMPACT, Hardesty works with a network of nearly 100 companies known as the “Network of Champions.” He advises HR professionals to make sure others in their organization are aware of available and necessary steps for hiring workers with TBI.

In addition, Hardesty serves within Northrop Grumman as the “champion” in the company’s technical services department in Lakewood, Wash. “I make sure managers know about the program. I work with the talent acquisition manager. I work with hiring managers.”

“Every person who enters the program, by coming into the program, is self-disclosing as a disabled person,” Hardesty said. So steps are taken immediately to have a company nurse determine if any accommodation will be needed during the interview.

Retaining Employees Who Have TBI

Affinity groups for employees with disabilities and for military veterans are good places to advertise when recruiting people with TBI and can play a key role in employee retention and development, said Jeffery S. Klare, CEO of Hire Disability Solutions in West Nyack, N.Y.

After his organization matches candidates who have disabilities and job skills with employers, they monitor employee performance for a year, Klare explained. During that time it's vital for the new employee to form one or more personal connections within the company.

In large companies that could be someone from a corporate affinity group, but "even in a small company there's usually one person who has been a vet, one person who can be in a mentoring situation," he said. That person can be "on the lookout" for accommodations the new employee might need but be reluctant to request.

Hodge said Northrop Grumman's affinity groups for people with disabilities and for veterans help retain valued employees. Members of the group give new employees "someone they can confide in; go to with questions. They feel connected to that network inside," she said. "It's up to the employer to create a culture so that employees feel comfortable saying what they need."

Stephenie Overman is a workplace and health writer who is based in Arlington, Va.

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