**A Chance to See Disabilities as Assets**

By Peggy Klaus, February 4, 2012 [New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/jobs/disabilities-can-be-workplace-assets.html?_r=2)

MANY people know of Berkeley, Calif., as the birthplace, in the 1960’s, of the Free Speech Movement. Fewer people know that Berkeley also played a major role in the disability rights movement. It was here, also in the ’60s, that Ed Roberts — a student with quadriplegia — became an outspoken advocate of the cause.

I became aware of this after being invited to give a lecture for the Disabled Students’ Program at the University of California. I was delighted and, of course, flattered, but I was also nervous.

Sure, I’d given workshops and lectures hundreds of times, but this would be my first time speaking to an audience made up entirely of people with disabilities. To be perfectly honest, I’d always felt uncomfortable around disabled people. Suppose I said the wrong thing? Came off as insensitive?

I needed guidance, so I turned to Paul Hippolitus, the director of the program. Reluctantly, I acknowledged my discomfort. Paul had spent 30 years at the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the federal Labor Department before coming to the university, and he had heard it all before.

“Perfectly normal,” he told me. “In this culture, nearly everyone is uncomfortable with disability.”

Apparently that goes for those with disabilities, too. Enduring the stares and the obvious uneasiness of others, people with disabilities often feel painfully self-conscious. Not surprisingly, they can lack self-confidence.

His students are not exempt. It’s the reason, he says, that many opt to go on to graduate school, thereby delaying the task of entering the work force. Besides the distinct disincentive to work because of a possible loss of federal disability benefits, the students are not nurtured, and are often discouraged, when it comes to career goals.

Today, more than 20 years after the Americans With Disabilities Act became law, the percentage of the disabled population that is employed is only 17.9 percent. That compares with 63.7 percent for people without a disability.

Why the lack of progress? Perhaps some employers fear that “reasonable accommodation” of the disabled, as the law terms it, will require extra time, resources and money. That fear, according to the federal Job Accommodation Network, is unfounded; many accommodations cost nothing or run into the hundreds of dollars at most.

BUT Mr. Hippolitus is not waiting for employers. He refuses to watch these talented students give up on careers. He is betting that with the proper tools, they can bring about the change themselves. He has just started teaching a course, called Professional Development and Disability, that focuses not only on the principles and practices of disability employment but also on strategies for navigating the world of work.

Clearly, and especially in this economy, there’s a challenge ahead for these students. For them, as with everyone else, nailing the interview is often crucial to getting the job.

Employers are prohibited by law from asking about an applicant’s disability. But if the disability is visible, that won’t stop them from having concerns. The applicants themselves are under no such restriction, and may find it best to address employers’ potential reservations head-on — a topic that is addressed in the course. This not only serves to pop that awkward thought balloon, but it also opens an opportunity to talk about the skills required to manage a disability, like strategic planning and time management.

To start with a line like, “You may be wondering how I could manage to travel as part of the job,” means that job applicants can elaborate on how they manage the rigors of travel, given their limitations. In addition to talking about their work and academic experience, they can offer up “brag nuggets” and stories — talking about the preparations they needed for a trip to Europe, for example, or to make an 8 a.m. class.

As for my lecture, I needn’t have worried. The students put me at ease immediately with their warmth and hunger to learn. The subject matter made them feel part of the mainstream of the employment culture, and they saw how their disability could be presented as a real asset in the workplace, in terms of their ability to cope and be full-time adapters.

If more of us can see disability as both a challenge and an asset, the nation will be well on the way to fully using the job skills of all of its citizens.