

Disabled workers counteract handicaps

by Jane Owens

Handicapped workers—a category that's difficult to separate from the general labor force, according to personnel at three Lincoln employment agencies.

None of the agencies keep statistics on the number of handicapped persons they help find jobs, officials said.

"If a person is disabled but remains active and does his job, you don't really consider him to be handicapped," UNL Personnel Director Roy Loudon, said. This is the major reason the personnel office keeps no records of the number of handicapped workers at UNL, he said.

Loudon said he estimates that "roughly two or three per cent" of UNL employees have some type of disability.

"Quite often a person's handicap won't enter into his work qualifications at all," according to Mary Crom, counselor at the State Employment Service. "If a secretary can take dictation, what does it matter if she only has one leg?"

"There is a multitude of jobs a disabled person can do where his handicap won't affect his performance," said Robert Brandt, director of the Department of Veterans Affairs for the State of Nebraska.

However, not all of the handicapped workers who seek employment through the veterans office are placed in jobs, Brandt said.

"You can't place everyone because you have to find the right job to go along with the disability," he said.

Brandt estimated that about 10 per cent of the veteran's who find employment through the office have some sort of disability.

Handicapped workers hold a wide variety of positions. They have jobs ranging from custodial work to high-ranking administrative posts at UNL, Loudon said.

"The mentally handicapped are usually placed on jobs where they receive routine instructions and can carry out simplified tasks. With the physically handicapped, areas (of employment) are much much broader," he explained.

The personnel department cooperates with several agencies for the mentally retarded and the physically handicapped to obtain employees, the director said.

Some UNL employees from the Beatrice State Home work on campus and live in Lincoln "in a sort of halfway house" with other patients, Loudon said.

Handicapped employees receive no formalized training on campus. Instead, they are trained informally on-the-job or by private agencies, he said.

Sometimes the personnel office and various agencies will establish special work programs "to help disabled workers develop an area of expertise," Loudon said.

The UNL office currently is planning a project where visually handicapped persons would man the radios used by UNL Campus Security.

"The problem (in establishing such programs) is funding," Loudon said. "We had originally planned to set up the program for a one-year trial period, using federal and state funds, but it's a touchy situation. We're not sure the funds will come through."

What are the advantages to employers who hire handicapped workers?

"Since these people have a more difficult time finding jobs, they seem to cherish those jobs a great deal more than the average person," Loudon said. "They're more punctual, more stable on the job and don't take as many sick leaves."

The public is becoming more aware of the problems facing the handicapped, Loudon said.

"Up until 10 years ago, the average person never thought a great deal about (handicapped) people having problems getting into buildings," Loudon said. "Now you find curb cuts all over Lincoln, and many buildings downtown and at UNL now have ground entrances." Entrance ramps have been added to old campus buildings and are included in new campus building plans, he said.

"People are finally becoming sensitized to the problems of the handicapped," he added.

"The public attitude (on hiring disabled veterans) has been very good," Brandt said. "our office, along with the State Employment Office and agencies throughout the state, seems to be doing a fine job of finding employment for disabled veterans."



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"Employers often find that the disabled vet is more conscientious of his duties than an able-bodied person. He knows he's got to meet the requirements of the job, and he really tries."

Handicapped veterans, along with other eligible veterans, can receive on-the-job training. Six office staff members travel throughout Nebraska, contacting employers and establishing such training programs, Brandt said. Veterans eligible under the G.I. Bill also can attend approved schools, he added.

According to Crom, the staff at the State Employment Service refers both handicapped and able-bodied persons to employers. The employer then decides whom he wants to hire.

In referring the handicapped for jobs, "you try to stress the person's ability and not his disability," Crom said.

"If you label someone as 'handicapped,' employers are biased already, no matter what they say. You must stress a person's positive qualities," she said.

"When we send handicapped persons out on their own (to apply for jobs) we feel that they can usually sell themselves above their limitations," she said.

Although handicapped persons receive no job training through the employment office, the staff might refer them to other training agencies, Crom said.

What are some of the problems involved in referring the handicapped for jobs?

"The majority of handicapped people don't have the necessary skills to put them into the labor market," Crom said.

"Some (handicapped persons) have been lucky and have gone to school, but then they don't really consider themselves as handicapped," she added.

According to Crom, statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor indicate that handicapped workers "seem to be less accident prone and more careful on the job. They know they have to do their best to compete with others."

"You have good and bad workers in both categories. Poor work records are often due to lack of skills and lack of education," she said.

daily nebraskan

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The Daily Nebraskan is written, edited and managed by students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. It is editorially independent of the University faculty, administration and student body.

The Daily Nebraskan is published by the Publications Committee on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday throughout the fall and spring semesters except holidays and vacations.

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Second class postage paid at Lincoln, Nebraska.
Address: The Daily Nebraskan, 34 Nebraska Union/14th & R Streets/Lincoln, Nebr. 68508. Telephone: 402-472/2588.

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