

Training, encouragement help people get back to work

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The most important challenge a person with a disability might have in finding a job may not be overcoming a potential employer's reluctance. It might be overcoming the person's own misconceptions and lack of confidence.

In metro Phoenix's tight job market, many employers see major advantages to hiring willing workers. And many programs, both government-run and non-profit, are available to provide training and support.

The biggest hurdle can be reaching potential workers with disabilities and convincing them of their value and potential, according to several disability assistance groups. Agencies across Arizona currently are working to raise awareness of the opportunities to work, and of the programs available to help.

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Terri Guy is just one example of a worker whose

attitude, and life, have been turned around.

About ten years ago, she was working her dream job.

With more than 20 years' experience in administrative and management roles, she had landed a position as office manager of a neurologist's office, and she loved it.

Then one day she woke up and realized she couldn't walk or talk.

Guy, 48, lives with multiple sclerosis, and eight years ago, she reluctantly quit her dream job to undergo treatment for her worsening symptoms.

She went on Social Security disability benefits, and without a steady job, she said the next few years morphed into a downward spiral of feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem.

"When you're on disability, you fall into this black hole you don't think there's an end to," she said. "The depression all by itself is paralyzing."

A Phoenix-based organization that provides vocational guidance and counseling, training and assistance technology worked with Guy to open up opportunities for her.

"It's about the individual person focusing on accepting who he or she is, not making decisions based on a label," said Susan Webb, employment

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services director for Arizona Bridge to Independent Living, or ABIL.

A federal program, called Ticket to Work, awards "tickets" to disability beneficiaries that can be redeemed at employment networks like ABIL in exchange for free training and other services they need to get back to work. While that program has helped ABIL place hundreds of people in jobs, not all people who receive a ticket choose to participate, Webb said.

Often, people with disabilities mistakenly believe they'll lose their benefits if they return to work, or because they don't know of options available, logistical things like a lack of transportation might hinder them from pursuing a job, she said.

ABIL is creating public service announcements to counter some of those misconceptions, she said.

The depression that Guy once experienced is also a hurdle people with disabilities encounter when they want to re-enter the workforce, Webb said, and sometimes it's so severe it prevents a person from taking action to get a job.

For Guy, however, depression didn't prevent her from getting a new job. Before she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, Guy had also lived with a severe hearing deficit, and she had never let it stop her from pursuing a career.

After rehabilitation for her multiple sclerosis, rather, her main challenge stemmed from having to explain the five-year gap on her résumé. She said she learned from ABIL, which offers an employment assistance service, that she didn't have to be ashamed of that gap, but instead in an interview she could discuss how she maintained her job skills during that time.

ABIL sent Guy out on two interviews, and she got two job offers.

Last week, she celebrated her third anniversary working as a program services evaluator for DES. There, she educates other people about family, food, employment and disability assistance programs.

"Instead of sitting at home feeling sorry for myself, now I live in a world of 'yes's,'" she said.

"Yes, I can do it."

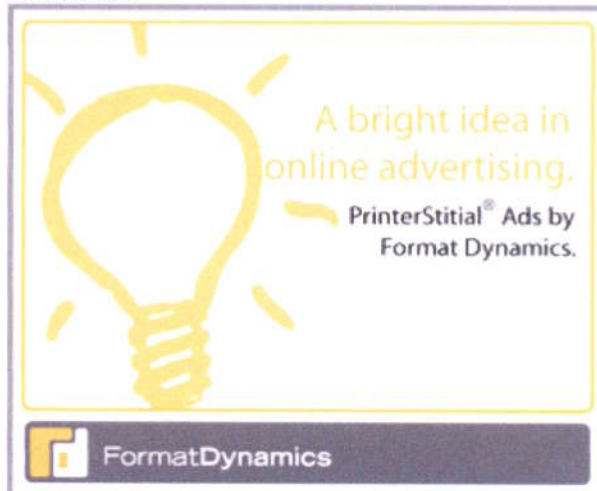
The U.S. Department of Labor recognized National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October to promote awareness of the contributions and skills of people who, like Guy, have a disability but want to return to work.

Mike Steinbring, employment services coordinator for the Arizona Department of Economic Security, said many employers are looking at people with disabilities as a large untapped market to find workers.

"A lot of times there are people who have an extensive work background and are educated who may have gotten a disability," Steinbring said. "With support, assessment, training and in some cases, reeducation, they can transfer their skills into a different job. Employers are really looking at a rather large pool of people with vocational skills."

Through its Vocational Rehabilitation division, DES also offers disability work assessments, vocational guidance, counseling, training, worksite evaluations, assistance technology and in some cases, tuition funding for additional education.

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