Adversity Breeds Innovation

The Able Trust encourages employers to consider the benefits of hiring a person with a disability.

The disability stereotype is stripped away after meeting individuals like Tampa attorney Richard Salem.

It’s not uncommon for employers to include descriptors like these when advertising for desired talent: problem-solving skills, innovative, driven. Interestingly enough, these are also descriptors that fit many of the 54 million Americans with a disability who would like to be employed.

Living with a disability has its advantages when it comes to encouraging an individual to look at circumstances from a different perspective. In order to achieve lofty goals or simple tasks, a limitation or disability requires the brain to search for another solution. In today’s economy, businesses are reevaluating strategies, refining products or services and exploring new markets. Dr. Susanne Homant, CEO of The Able Trust, suggests that companies looking for a way to survive or thrive take a second look at hiring a person with a disability.

“We encourage executives to look at an applicant’s ability over any disability they may have because it’s the RIGHT thing to do,” says Homant. “However, we also encourage them to take another look because it’s the SMART thing to do.”

An Untapped Market

According to the U.S. Census, people with disabilities are a trillion dollar market nationally and a multi-million dollar market in Florida. “They have discretionary income and are loyal customers — especially when a company meets their need for access,” Homant says.

The Able Trust awards grants to nonprofit agencies providing employment-related programs to people with disabilities in Florida. In the past 19 years, more than $25 million in grants have been awarded to organizations in all 67 counties, allowing thousands of people with disabilities to enter the workforce.

“Having a person with a disability on the team brings insight into a virtually untapped market.”

— Dr. Susanne Homant, CEO of The Able Trust

The fact that Susanne Homant is now at the helm of this organization is somewhat fortuitous. She has several family members with disabilities who lived — and are living — vibrant, successful lives. The mission of The Able Trust allows her to excel in a profession that is also a personal passion. She is confident The Able Trust Programs like High School/High Tech and Youth Leadership Forum will equip young people with disabilities with skills and exposure to a host of opportunities before them.

Labels Belie Reality

One significant hurdle for people with disabilities is simply overcoming the label that fosters an image of “weak” or “needy” in the minds of some people. Stereotypes like these are stripped away after meeting individuals like Richard Salem.

Salem suffered a sports injury in high school, which led to the loss of his vision. His determined mother pushed him to achieve his goals, and after college graduation in 1969, Salem applied to Duke School of Law. He vividly remembers his interview with the Dean who was responsible for approving his application.

“He said I met all the requirements for admission, but hesitated and said, ‘The only problem is, we’ve never had a blind student at Duke Law School.’ Then, I let him know I had never been to law school as a blind student, so we could figure it out together!”

While Salem’s eyesight may have dimmed, his internal vision thrust him into the bright light of success. Salem graduated from Duke Law School in 1972 and is the founder of the Salem Law Firm in Tampa.

After many years of success, Salem founded Enable America, a nonprofit organization that works with The Able Trust to encourage mentoring and job shadowing for people with disabilities, which improves their chances of getting a job. “Eyes are opened to the fact that people with disabilities are quite able to achieve and inspire others to achieve; and the people with disabilities begin to focus their vision to attain new dreams. Everyone benefits,” Salem says.

How can you get involved?

▸ Attend the 2010 Ability Celebration May 6 at Disney’s Grand Floridian Resort & Spa
Register at www.abletrust.org

▸ Get involved with a High School/High Tech program in your area
Contact Cat Keen, Cat@abletrust.org

▸ Host a Disability Mentoring Day
Contact Sally Ash, Sally@abletrust.org