

Employers' Wariness Thwarts Many Blind Jobseekers

David Crary, AP National Writer

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. (AP) -- Back in the late 1980s, when Maura Mazzocca was a human resources administrator with a Boston-area firm, a blind man showed up to apply for a job. Today, she remembers the encounter ruefully.

"What I kept thinking about was, 'How can this man work in a manufacturing company?'" Mazzocca recalled, saying she looked past his abilities and saw only his disability.

"I wish now I'd given him a chance."

That reflectiveness is heartfelt. Mazzocca lost her own eyesight in 1994 through complications related to diabetes. Now as a jobseeker herself, she knows firsthand the many hurdles the blind must overcome in pursuit of full-time work.

At a job fair last month for blind and low-vision people, there she was going table to table, with a sighted volunteer by her side. Some of the other 80 jobseekers carried white canes, a few had guide dogs.

Like the rest, Mazzocca was greeted with firm handshakes and encouraging words — but none of the employers she spoke with had job openings matching her interests and qualifications.

The venue was the former Radcliffe College gymnasium where Helen Keller exercised en route to becoming the first deaf/blind person to earn a bachelor of arts degree in 1904. Over the ensuing decades, Keller helped increase public awareness of blindness and empathy for those affected by it.

Yet blind people remain largely unwanted in the U.S. workplace, despite technological advances that dramatically boost their capabilities. Only about 24 percent of working-age Americans with visual disabilities had full-time jobs as of 2011, according to Cornell University's Employment and Disability Institute.

"There's a lot of stigma, a lot of obstacles," said Mazzocca, 51. "It comes down to educating employers... It's going to take a really long time, if ever, for them to see us for who we are and what we bring to the table."

What they bring, according to national advocates for the blind, is a strong work ethic, plus deeper-than-average loyalty to their employers. That's in addition to whatever talents and training they bring, just like any other applicant.

In the current economy, good jobs are hard to come by for anyone, even the

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sighted. But the blind face added challenges. Even employers professing interest in hiring blind people often don't follow through out of concern that they might be a bit slower with key tasks or require assistance that could be burdensome.

In some cases, said Mazzocca, who has held professional jobs since she lost her sight, "They're thinking, 'What if I have to fire them? Will they sue me?'"

Many national and local organizations are working hard to change the equation, through a mix of outreach to employers, training and counseling for jobseekers, and support for technological development. Though sometimes costly, there are now myriad devices and technologies that can convert computer text or printed pages into Braille or spoken words.

Still, the steadiest sources of jobs for many blind people are nonprofit organizations with missions related to blindness and other disabilities.

Among them is National Industries for the Blind, a network of 91 nonprofit agencies which collectively employ about 6,000 blind people. It recently conducted a survey of 400 hiring managers and human resource executives across the U.S.

The survey found 54 percent of hiring managers said there were few jobs at their company that blind employees could perform, 45 percent said accommodating such workers would require "considerable expense," 42 percent said blind employees would need someone to help them on the job, and 34 percent said they were more likely to have work-related accidents than sighted employees.

"We're having to deal with lots of misconceptions and myths," said Kevin Lynch, CEO of National Industries for the Blind. "From that standpoint, the study was clearly disappointing, but it gives us the opportunity to find a way forward."

Lynch and his colleagues take heart from federal initiatives that have expanded hiring of blind people by government agencies and federal contractors. They also are encouraged by efforts of the U.S. Business Leadership Network, a coalition led by several dozen major corporations seeking to boost employment of people with disabilities, including blindness.

Another initiative called CareerConnect, launched by the American Foundation for the Blind, offers an array of resources and advice for blind jobseekers, including a mentorship program to connect them with blind people working in the professions they aspire to.

Joe Strechay, program manager for CareerConnect, said visually impaired people tend to be dedicated workers — less likely than others to miss a shift or quit the job, and no more likely than others to sue in the event of dismissal.

Among those featured on CareerConnect's website is Jay Blake, a race car mechanic and pit crew chief. Other role models include Erik Weihenmayer, the first blind person to climb Mount Everest, and the late Richard Casey, the first blind federal trial judge.

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Yet a glance through listings of prominent blind people conveys some of the challenges faced by jobseekers. There are many famous blind musicians, such as Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder, but a dearth of notables in many other fields. In the U.S. Congress, for example, there have been several blind members — but none since 1941.

Numerous blind Americans have built successful careers as advocates of the visually impaired, but the pathway often is difficult.

Frederic Schroeder, who served as commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration under President Bill Clinton, recalls sending out 35 job applications after earning his master's degree in special education — and getting not a single offer in reply.

Such rejection can be demoralizing, says Schroeder, now a professor of vocational rehabilitation with San Diego State University and a vice president of the National Federation of the Blind.

"We need to make sure blind people don't think, 'Society doesn't want me,' and stop trying," he said. "If a person gives up hope of finding a suitable job, it's a terrible waste of human resources. It's terrible for people to live in poverty simply because of public misunderstanding." About 31 percent of working-age people with visual impairments live below the poverty line, roughly double the overall national rate, according to Cornell's Employment and Disability Institute.

At the recent job fair, freelance writer John Christie, 57, said he sometimes struggles to keep up his spirits while pursuing a full-time job.

"When I apply for something, I never hear back," he said, suggesting that he was disadvantaged by a resume listing numerous articles related to blindness.

"Sometimes I'm optimistic, sometimes I'm frustrated," he said. "It depends on the day. Sometimes you get burned out."

Another jobseeker, 32-year-old Jeff Paquette, graduated in 2011 from Johnson & Wales University in Providence, R.I., and is seeking work in the tourism/hospitality industry.

Declared legally blind in 2006, he has limited vision that prevents him from driving but enables him to use public transportation on his own and to read, sometimes with the help of a magnification option on his computer.

"I honestly don't know from employer to employer what their perceptions of someone like me will be," said Paquette, who carries a white cane when he's out and about. "I have to be honest with them. I will need some accommodation — but I'm fully capable."

At the job fair, the only employer from the hospitality sector was Hyatt Hotels. Their

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representative told Paquette to keep checking on the company's jobs website.

This was the third year for the event. Marianne Gilmore of the Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Mass., one of the sponsors, said about 190 jobseekers attended during the first two years, collectively garnering two internships and perhaps a half-dozen full-time jobs.

"It has to be the right match," Gilmore said.

Even with no job offers, Maura Mazzocca was glad she attended — saying the face-to-face encounters and conversations about job hunting were useful.

"People are not coming here expecting to get a job," she said. "If they did, they'd be disappointed."

Mazzocca grew up in Burlington, Mass., about 15 miles from Boston, and graduated from Westfield State College in 1984. A series of jobs followed, including a stint as human resources administrator with EG&G Torque Systems in Watertown, Mass., where she encountered the blind jobseeker.

She began experiencing vision problems in 1990 and underwent several operations before losing her sight in 1994. A few years of uncertainty followed, before she learned how to read Braille and developed other skills through the Carroll Center.

In 1999, she landed a job with Fidelity Investments, but gave that up in 2001 after she and her husband decided to adopt a 10-year-old boy.

She returned to the workplace in 2010, getting hired as diversity manager at Hanscomb Air Force Base, a few miles from Burlington. After 16 months, however, she lost the job — her superiors told her she "wasn't a good fit" and lacked sufficient managerial experience.

"I did have room for improvement — I don't think fact that I was blind had anything to do with it," Mazzocca said.

And yet she second-guessed her approach to the job.

"I had a lot to learn — but I didn't like to ask for help," she said. "Going forward, in my next position, I won't be afraid to ask for help sooner."

She hopes to find work as a diversity coordinator, either for a municipality or a business.

Among the 29 employers at the job fair were TD Bank, retailer T.J. Maxx, and several branches of Harvard University, including the job fair's host — the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Its human resources director, Charles Curti, said the institute has no full-time blind employees at present but was pleased by the outcome of two recent summer internships for students from the Perkins School for the Blind.

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In the course of his work, Curti has learned about evolving technologies now available to boost blind workers' capabilities. "It's an awakening experience," he said, a reason for optimism that the bias faced by blind jobseekers will gradually fade.

"Fifteen years ago, when I'd talk about hiring blind people, I was stonewalled by human-resource colleagues," he said. "Now it's a completely different conversation. They're sold on the idea — they just need to know how to make it work."

Behind another table was Richard Curtis, a vice president of State Street Corp., a Boston-based financial services company. He said State Street, with a global workforce of many thousands, believes that openness toward hiring people with disabilities will help it stay ahead of the competition.

Last summer, Curtis arranged internships for two visually impaired young men — part of an effort to learn what accommodations would be needed and what challenges might arise for any blind employees hired in the future. Using Excel spreadsheets and other data-retrieval systems, the interns did research and helped provide information for company reports.

"We tried to push them and they loved that... They don't want to be coddled," Curtis said. "Once they're trained, for the roles we had them do, they'd be equal in speed or accuracy to any other employee."

Online:

CareerConnect: <http://www.afb.org/section.aspx?FolderID=2&SectionID=7> [1]

National Industries for the Blind: <http://www.nib.org/> [2]

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