

# **Alaskan Employer Perspectives on Hiring Individuals with Disabilities**

## Summary Report

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## Summary

Nationally, 72% of the non-disabled population and only 33% of the disabled population are currently employed. In Alaska, 47% of the disabled population (any disability) and 34% of individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities are employed, compared to 74% of non-disabled Alaskans who are in the workforce (Butterworth et al. 2015). Research indicates that employers may harbor negative attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities, contributing to such low employment rates (Gilbride et al. 2000; Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, and Brooks). In an effort to gather data on the barriers to employing people with disabilities in Alaska from the employer's perspective, the Alaska Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (GCDSE) ), funded as part of its federal grant work on the Alaska Integrated Employment Initiative, distributed a survey to a statewide conference for human resource professionals.

Survey results included overall positive experiences for those employers that had hired individuals with disabilities. However, federal contractors (almost a third of respondents) were largely "unsure" or reported not meeting the 7% utilization goal derived from Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act with respect to hiring individuals with disabilities. Generally, employers thought "some" or "most" individuals with disabilities could be employed but their general comfort level with doing so was very low. In addition, "hidden" disabilities such as chronic alcoholism and substance abuse were not as easily perceived disabilities by employers, when compared with more "visible" disabilities (i.e. utilizing a wheelchair). With respect to barriers to hiring people with disabilities, the largest concerns are if the individual has the necessary skills for the job; requires additional supervision, training, resources, and costs; or poses increased safety/liability risks in the workplace. Supervisors were concerned with their own ability to properly support individuals who needed accommodations, believing it was too easy to make a mistake and "get sued." Recommendations for change include educational programs for employers that focus on awareness of various disabilities, instructions on how to include and integrate diverse groups of people in the workplace, and information on accessing resources, supports, and making reasonable accommodations.

## Methods

On September 25, 2015, staff of the GCDSE disseminated a paper survey to 240 conference attendees from approximately 158 Alaskan businesses at the 2015 Alaska Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Conference in Anchorage, Alaska. The paper survey was distributed and collected

during the midday keynote address. Prior to having attendees complete the survey, GCDSE staff gave a brief introduction to the survey, where participants were entered into a drawing for completing the anonymous questionnaire.

### ***Survey***

Employment project lead Kristin Vandagriff developed the quantitative and qualitative survey questions based on ongoing perceived barriers to increasing employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities (see Appendix, page 12). These questions were derived from collaborative work with the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority to better understand social norms of hiring individuals with disabilities and how efforts might best be targeted to employers for the future. Inconsistency with employers fully understanding what constitutes a disability was determined to be one area of inquiry. The comfort level for hiring has been a key barrier noted previously and something the survey was intended to help shed additional light upon. Open-ended questions were included to more fully understand responses.

An interagency employer engagement collaborative comprised of staff from the Alaska Departments of Health and Social Services and Labor and Workforce Development, has completed federal contractor outreach and found it important to get a better understanding of their perceptions to hiring individuals with disabilities. All survey questions were developed to assist in framing future employer engagement efforts, better targeting the biggest hurdles for employers. All eight questions were reviewed by the GCDSE Executive Director and Research Analyst, the evaluation team with the University of Alaska Center for Human Development (Alaska's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities), and the Alaska Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM).

Previous research suggests that employers are more comfortable answering indirect questions as to why employers might not hire, retain, or accommodate workers with disabilities, rather than answer questions directly about their own practices (Kaye, Jans, & Jones 2011). This is largely because of the *social desirability bias* (Fisher 1993; Neeley & Cronley 2004) in which survey respondents report what they think the researchers want to see rather than reporting their true feelings and practices, which may be socially unacceptable or illegal. Therefore, we developed survey questions that indirectly ask human resources professionals about barriers to hiring people with disabilities that any Alaskan employer may face.

## Analysis

The completed paper surveys were inputted into Survey Monkey for electronic record-keeping and analysis. Data were then downloaded into Excel to produce descriptive statistical charts and graphs. Open-ended responses were coded using a line-by-line technique, common in qualitative analysis (see Bradley, Curry & Devers 2007). These responses were then grouped into themes, described below.

## Results

One hundred and three (103) respondents completed and returned the survey, 31 of which were federal contractors. Not all respondents answered every question. Additionally, several questions were “check all that apply” or open-ended responses (see Appendix, page 12).

### Quantitative Results

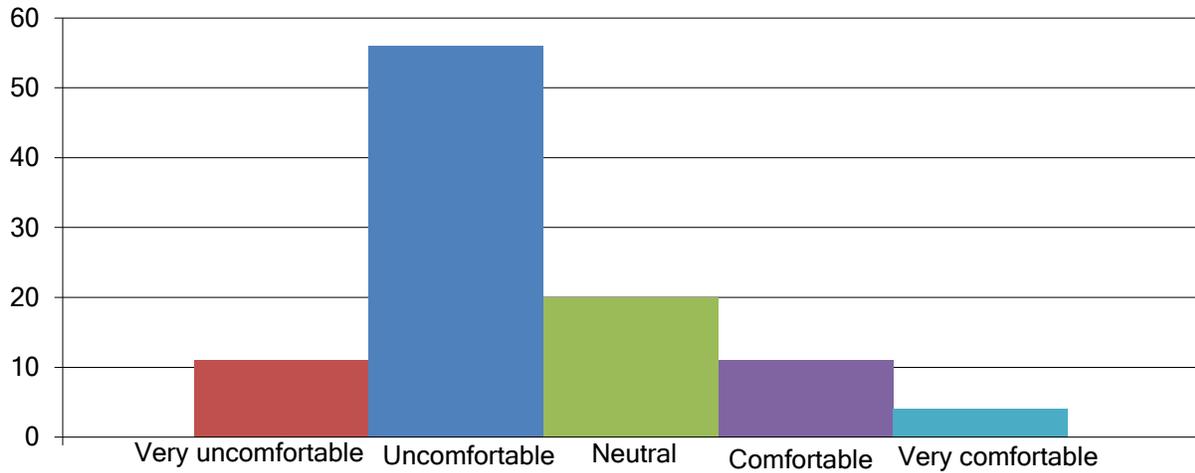
Although all respondents knew that intellectual and developmental disabilities constituted forms of “disability” there was variability in the rest of the responses. Respondents were less likely to recognize alcohol and chronic substance abuse as disabilities. Likewise, several participants were thrown off by the options of “advanced age” and “poverty” as potential disabilities, marking them as disabilities although they are not legally considered as such in Alaska.

Which of the following constitutes a disability? (please choose all that apply)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
<i>Intellectual / developmental challenges</i>	<i>100.0%</i>	<i>90</i>
Traumatic brain injury	94.4%	85
Mental illness	93.3%	84
Hard of hearing	91.1%	82
Alzheimer's & related dementia	90.0%	81
Utilizing a wheelchair	86.7%	78
Low vision	85.6%	77
alcohol & chronic substance abuse	72.2%	65
<i>Advanced age</i>	<i>48.9%</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>Poverty</i>	<i>35.6%</i>	<i>32</i>
	<i>answered question</i>	<b>90</b>
	<i>skipped question</i>	<b>13</b>

Alaskan employers largely report discomfort at the idea of employing people with disabilities. The largest answer options chosen were “very uncomfortable” to “uncomfortable” (66%) while the least respondents answered that they believed employers were “very comfortable” employing people with

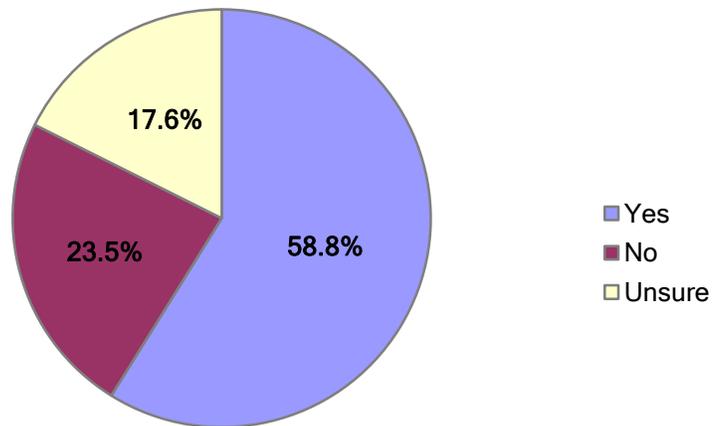
disabilities (N=4).

### How comfortable do you think employers are regarding hiring someone with a disability?

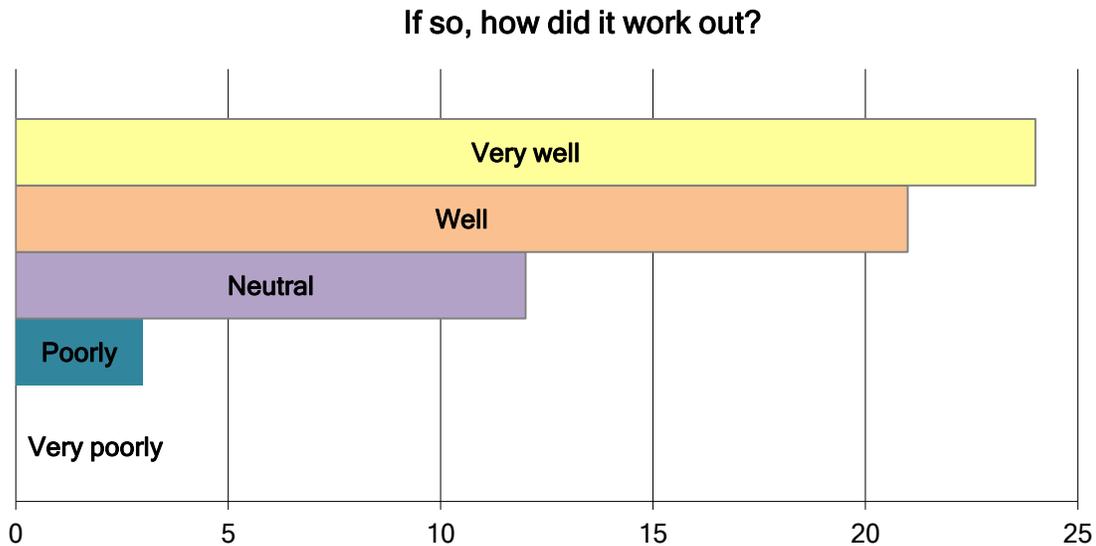


Despite perceived discomfort about employing people with disabilities, most survey respondents (76.4%) indicated that they had hired someone with a disability (N=60) at some point in their careers or were unsure if their employees had disabilities (N=18).

### Have you hired someone with a disability before?



For those employers who have hired people with disabilities before, 60 respondents rated how well they believed these individuals fit in at the organization. In general, employers believed their disabled employees to have worked out “well,” “very well,” or “neutral” in their agencies (95%).

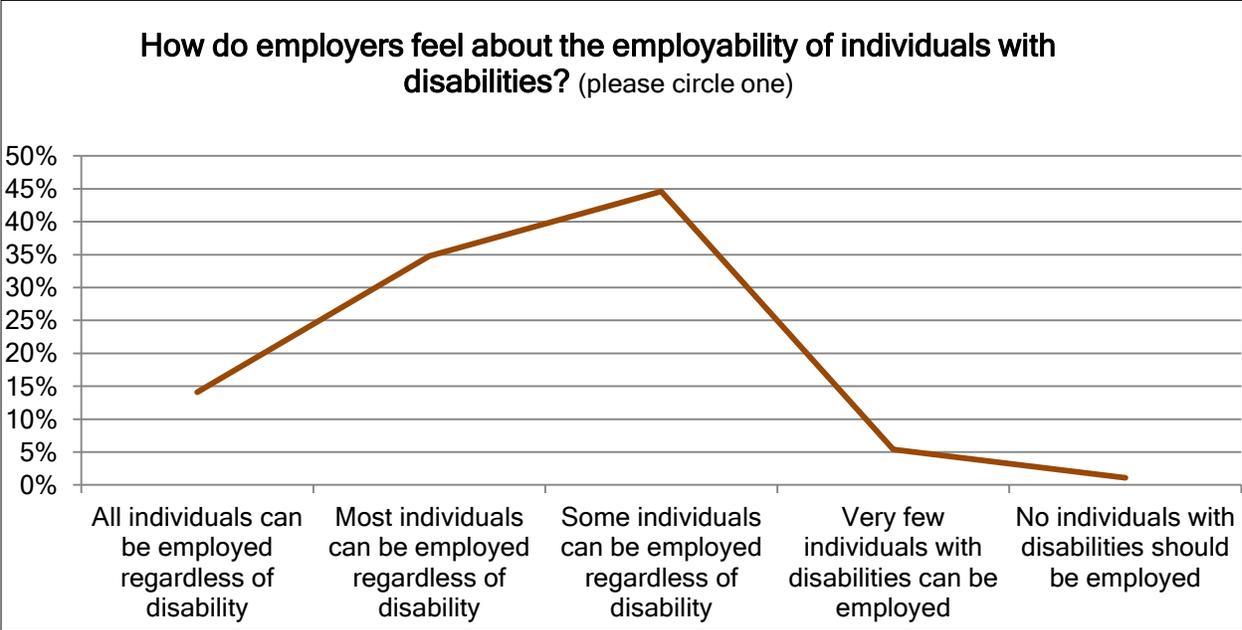


No respondents reported an outcome of “very poorly” and only three (N=3) employers reported that hiring an individual with disabilities had worked out “poorly” for the organization. However, when provided with a selection of possible employment barriers to choose from, respondents were able to identify several reasons why employers may not hire those with disabilities.

Employer respondents did not believe that recruitment was a major obstacle to employment, but rather identified additional supervision, loss of productivity, perceived lack of skills, and how to handle the situation if the employee does not work out as the main barriers. Secondary concerns included individual safety, inability to make reasonable accommodation, attitudes of other employees, and increased costs to the business. Eight (N=8) respondents reported no barriers and 7 respondents wrote in their own barriers (reported below).

What are the barriers for hiring an individual with a disability? (please choose all that apply)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Concern regarding additional supervision	68.1%	64
Concern regarding loss of productivity	68.1%	64
Concern that the individual does not possess the necessary skills/training for the job	63.8%	60
Concern regarding how to handle the situation if the employee does not work out	57.4%	54
Concern over individual safety	56.4%	53
Unfamiliarity with reasonable accommodations	53.2%	50
Concern about the attitudes of other employees and co-workers towards people with disabilities	51.1%	48
Concern regarding increased costs	41.5%	39
Unsure where to post jobs to best recruit individuals with disabilities	26.6%	25
No barriers encountered	8.5%	8
Other barrier (please specify)	7.4%	7
<b>answered question</b>		<b>94</b>
<b>skipped question</b>		<b>9</b>

Of the 31 federal contractors to take the survey, only three (9.7%) reported meeting their 7% utilization goal under section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act and 54.8% of respondents reported being “unsure” (N=17). Eleven employers (35.5%) indicated that they have not met the 7% goal.



A majority of respondents (N = 45) reported that employers believe “most” or “some” individuals with disabilities are employable (79.4%). Only 13 employers believed that all individuals with disabilities were employable (14%), and only 6 respondents believed that “very few” to “no” individuals with disabilities were employable (6.6%).

### ***Qualitative Results***

When asked to describe employers comfort levels regarding hiring someone with a disability, employers wrote in responses that fit several main themes; fear of low skills and productivity (N = 16), employers have no experience with disabilities so they avoid the unknown (N = 19), lack of knowledge about accommodations and resources (N = 14), perceived increase in costs and training (N = 11), concern for safety, risk, and liability (N = 11), and lack of appropriate supervision (N = 5). These are the same concerns that are reflected in the quantitative question above; however, the individual’s wording in these questions reveals potential solutions. Regarding low skills and perceived decreased productivity, one respondent indicated that,

***“Most [employers] don’t know what talents or skills these individuals can bring to your organization.”***

Rather than just listing potential negative aspects of hiring individuals with disabilities, this employer suggests that they need to be shown the value that people with disabilities can bring to the workforce. A generalized fear of the unknown was also apparent in many responses including,

***“I believe employers, in general, are pretty neutral in hiring someone with a disability. I believe it’s the unknown that may cause worry, or make them second-guess.”***

So what are these employers worried about? Mostly liability, risk, and lawsuits. One respondent said that supervisors may be recognizing their limitations by not hiring individuals with disabilities; that they do not believe in their own ability to properly supervise, make accommodations, and access resources in a budget-constrained, fast-paced work environment. Employers recognize that if they are not properly prepared, they themselves might be contributing to costly mistakes,

*“[they are] very unsure of what types of accommodations must be made, concerns that a hiring that doesn't work out will be difficult and costly in the end.”*

Likewise, another respondent recognized that proper training and supervisory needs may accompany hiring persons with disabilities for their success,

*“As HR, I would want to ensure we had the right supervisor to be supportive, patient, open-minded for a successful experience.”*

When asked if they have hired individuals with disabilities before, we asked respondents to tell us more about the nature of these disabilities. Since not all disabled individuals self-disclose their disabilities, this cannot be taken as an exhaustive list. Among those employers who were aware of their employee’s disabilities and reported them on the survey, 13 indicated hiring individuals with physical disabilities, such as amputees, using a walker, or a wheelchair. Ten (10) respondents indicated working with individuals who experience intellectual / developmental disabilities, 9 reported colleagues who were deaf or hard of hearing, 7 reported hiring individuals with mental illness, 3 with Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBIs), 2 with substance abuse, and 1 with low vision. Again, please note that mental illness, TBI, and substance abuse may be non-apparent disabilities that are underreported here.

When asked if they have hired individuals with disabilities before, respondents were encouraged to describe their experiences on how well these individuals worked out in their organizations. The responses were mostly positive (N = 27) with 10 negative responses. Positive responses tended to indicate that fewer accommodations were needed than had been previously assumed; with employers responding that they were pleasantly surprised. One respondent indicated,

*“Employees with these disabilities were motivated to show there was no issue with their abilities to work, they also generally improve morale”*

Other comments reported that employees with disabilities were diligent, skilled, and committed to their work. A small number of employers responded that an individual’s hygiene or the frequency with which they had “bad days” was occasionally an issue in the office. In summary, the write-in responses indicate that fear of low skilled employees; increased training, safety, and liability costs; as

well as the supervisor's own ability to properly support disabled individuals with resources were the biggest barriers.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This survey produced results that appear at odds with each other; the positive perceptions of those who had hired someone with a disability versus the overwhelmingly negative attitudes of employer comfort level in hiring someone with a disability. Employers feel that only a portion of the disability population can work, and that population mostly consists of individuals with visible disabilities. Fewer employers perceived individuals with chronic alcoholism and substance abuse as having "legitimate" disabilities. Further, alcohol and substance use and abuse are considered to be choices in American society, with negative moral underpinnings (Ben-Yehuda 1990). The notion that an individual's lifestyle choices created their disability tends to discredit the severity and nature of the disability, in the minds of the public. This perception can also be found regarding individuals with obesity-related illnesses and disabilities, all of which follows with an assumption that the condition could be easily cured if only they would make better choices (Kramer & Mayerson, 1994). Therefore, perceptions extend to indicate that individuals with alcohol or substance abuse do not truly need accommodations, supports, resources, or even a "second chance" at the ability to work.

### **Increase Education Efforts on Disabilities**

These public perceptions point to a high likelihood that individuals with disabilities often will not disclose their disabilities or request reasonable accommodations in the workplace. More targeted education of employers linking chronic alcohol and substance abuse with the concept of disability may be a necessary next step in increasing the overall understanding of disability within the community. Perceptions of disabilities more broadly will be especially important for federal contractors as they seek to meet their 7% utilization goal of individuals with disabilities denoted in Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Individuals with disabilities are often disproportionately represented at lower level positions, even in federal agencies which have long been working towards being a model employer of people with disabilities (EEOC 2016). Indeed, our qualitative data show that in Alaska, employers may not be confident that individuals with disabilities have the skills to do the job without increased supervision or

accommodations. Since employers are unfamiliar with reasonable accommodations or local resources for people with disabilities, they fear this carries an inordinate amount of cost or risk.

### **Use Success Stories & Describe Reasonable Accommodations**

While an employer may have had a positive experience with hiring an individual with a disability, this outcome is considered the exception to the rule, rather than the norm. It appears to be difficult for employers to see one successful hiring situation as indicative of the worth and value of people with disabilities in other positions. Recommendations to ameliorate this barrier are to include successful hiring stories and personal experiences in educational opportunities available for employers. Individuals with disabilities should share their stories with employers about how work has enriched their lives. Most importantly, success stories from employers need to be shared at conferences and trainings that show how valuable and enriching it is to have a diverse and inclusive workforce, how accommodations were made in that particular work environment generally at very low cost, and how performance problems were addressed and remedied similarly to any other employee. Employers who can dispel each other's fears and concerns likely hold a lot of power to improve institutional culture and perceptions around employees with disabilities.

### **Utilize Alternative Qualification Criterion**

Additionally, innovative electronic portfolios and other technology-based tools can show the breadth of an individual's skills, which sometimes cannot be viewed via written resumes or formal interviews. Educating employers on such alternative ways to evaluate potential candidates can change some expectations for the hiring process overall and bring in more qualified candidates, which would benefit more than just people with disabilities. Increasing the awareness of the skills and talents of all people, especially those with disabilities, can tap into this aspect of the labor pool. Establishing a more inclusive hiring process has great potential to reshape expectations and allow for a more broad awareness of diverse abilities available in the workforce.

### **Further Recommendations**

Additional future recommendations to increase employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities:

- Continue interagency collaborations which seek to make employers aware of resources, supports, and reasonable accommodations;
- Develop employer-specific trainings on best practices associated with recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and retaining employees with disabilities;
- Educational programming and public service media should include individuals with disabilities, emphasize skills and reasonable accommodations, share success stories from employers, and show individuals with disabilities in many different occupations presenting a variety of different skills and different types of disabilities;
- Increased employer utilization of job shadowing, mentor opportunities, and internships for individuals with disabilities as part of a company business practice to further awareness of skills and heighten employer expectations;
- Launch a pilot project with employers to test the reliability and validity of electronic portfolios and other innovative technology in the hiring process; and
- Continue targeted outreach and educational opportunities to federal contractors to alleviate barriers to reaching their 7% utilization goal.

Although these responses come from Alaskan employers, we believe these data may reflect broader patterns of employer perceptions. These recommendations may also be useful for program improvement initiatives in other states, as part of collaborative, multi-disciplinary efforts to increase employment among individuals with disabilities.

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**Employer Survey:**  
**Employing Individuals with Disabilities**

1. Which of the following constitutes a disability? *(please circle all that apply)*

- a. Utilizing a wheelchair
- b. Intellectual/developmental challenges
- c. Mental illness
- d. Alzheimer's & related dementia
- e. Advanced age
- f. low vision
- g. hard of hearing
- h. Poverty
- i. Traumatic brain injury
- j. Alcohol and chronic substance abuse

	Very uncomfortable	Un-comfortable	Neutral	Comfortable	Very comfortable
<b>2a. How comfortable do you think employers are regarding hiring someone with a disability?</b>	<input type="radio"/>				

2b. Please describe:

3a. Have you hired someone with a disability before? *(please circle one)*

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Unsure *(If no or unsure, please skip to #5)*

3b. If so, please describe:



	Very Poorly	Poorly	Neutral	Well	Very Well
4a. If so, how did it work out?	<input type="radio"/>				

4b. Please describe:

5. What are the barriers for hiring an individual with a disability? (please circle all that apply)

- a. Concern regarding increased costs
- b. Concern regarding additional supervision
- c. Concern regarding loss of productivity
- d. Concern that the individual does not possess the necessary skills/training for the job
- e. Concern regarding how to handle the situation if the employee does not work out
- f. Concern about the attitudes of other employees and co-workers towards people with disabilities
- g. Unfamiliarity with reasonable accommodations
- h. Concern over individual safety
- i. Unsure where to post jobs to best recruit individuals with disabilities
- j. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- k. No barriers encountered

6. Are you a federal contractor? (please circle one)

Yes    or    No                      (If yes, please complete #7, if no, please skip to #8)

7. Have you met the 7% utilization goal put forward by the Section 503 new regulation in the Rehabilitation Act? (please circle one)

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Unsure

8. How do employers feel about the employability of individuals with disabilities?  
(please circle one)

- d. All individuals can be employed regardless of disability
- e. Most individuals can be employed regardless of disability
- f. Some individuals can be employed regardless of disability
- g. Very few individuals with disabilities can be employed
- h. No individuals with disabilities should be employed