

THE NEW WORKFORCE **(Increased Hiring of Disabled Employees)**

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The Gap's emporium of affordable chic in midtown Manhattan throbs with New Economy action. Salesclerks sporting headsets race across the store to wait on tourists and time-starved New Yorkers. Stockboys heave huge boxes overflowing with clothes. At the center of this retail hubbub is Gap's "wild man in a wheelchair," supersalesman Wilfredo "Freddy" Laboy, a fast-talking, goateed 36-year-old who lost his legs when he fell off a freight train at age 9. Freddy dances across the store, popping wheelies and spinning himself around to the bouncy pop music. Little kids stare as he hops off his chair and onto the floor to grab a tangerine-colored T-shirt and then pulls himself up on his stump to reach for another pair of khakis. Instead of using the elevator, he prefers to horrify colleagues by scooting himself down the stairs. "It's faster," he says.

Freddy loves the Gap, and the Gap loves Freddy. But just six months ago, the story was altogether different. An amateur wheelchair basketball star who pulled himself through the New York City marathon, Freddy was used to letting nothing stand in his way. But even with New York City's unemployment level at record lows, he couldn't find a job. Once prospective employers caught sight of his legless torso, they lost interest. Still, on a whim, Freddy wheeled himself into the Gap past October. To his astonishment, they hired him. "I finally got accepted somewhere because they didn't just see the wheelchair," says the married father of three. "They saw me." Freddy may well be at the cusp of a huge change rocking the world of the workplace, marking the first time in history that people with disabilities have been poised to enter Corporate America en masse--many of them with the help of wheelchairs and seeing-eye dogs. Facing the worst labor shortage in modern history, recruiters are tapping the kinds of workers they would have easily blown off just 10 years ago: prepubescent wireheads, grandmothers--even convicted murderers. Next up are the disabled, who may prove to be the last great hope--if only because they're the only labor pool that hasn't been completely drained. At the same time, groundbreaking technology is creating ways for people with disabilities to better perform jobs, helping to erase the deep divisions that once existed between them and everybody else (page 68).

HELPFUL COMPUTERS. Sure, a few companies have a long record of hiring workers with disabilities. In the 1980s--still the Dark Ages of the movement--Marriott International Inc. was doing the unheard-of: paying adults with Down's Syndrome \$7 an hour to work 40 hours a week cleaning rooms and sweeping floors. But that was the exception. Despite the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), passed a decade ago this July, only 25% of the country's 15 million disabled who are also of working age are employed. Of the 75% who aren't working, Harris Polls indicate that two-thirds of them wish they could be. Says Paul H. Wehman, director of the rehabilitation research center at Virginia Commonwealth University: "The dirty little secret of the welfare-to-work movement is that people with disabilities got left out." That may be about to change. Never before has it been so easy and made so much economic sense for companies to invest

in workers with disabilities by making accommodations for them. "We can use new technologies to contribute to society in ways that weren't really possible when I started 25 years ago," says Michael Coleman, IBM's vice-president for global operations. Coleman, who lost both his hands in Vietnam when he was trying to defuse a bomb, is IBM's top-ranking disabled worker. He is also chairing the company's task force to find ways to employ more workers with disabilities. Crestar Bank has already found ways to make that happen. New-fangled voice-activated technology means that callers to the bank never know that customer-service representative Chris Harmon is a quadriplegic. He is so disabled that the recruiter who hired him had to stick a pen in his mouth so he could sign the employment application. At the company's Richmond (Va.) call center, he simply tells his computer what to do and the information appears on the screen in a flash. Crestar is one of a growing list of businesses that is mining the ranks of the disabled to solve labor crises they say would otherwise have been catastrophic. Turns out that what began as a last-ditch maneuver to stem this worker draught has yielded an unexpected boon that veteran employers of people with disabilities have long known about: The disabled are often more proficient, productive, and efficient than "normies," according to researchers. A 30-year study by DuPont revealed that job performance by workers with disabilities was equal to or better than fully functioning peers. The disabled had a 90% above-average job performance, with safety and attendance records that were far above the norm, too. Perhaps most enticing to human-resource heads pulling their hair out over the dot-com-induced worker exodus is the fact that people with disabilities can often be far more loyal to the employers who gave them a break and are therefore less likely to be lured away by a boss dangling a bigger paycheck.

"AT A LOSS." But until recently, the disabled were actually penalized for finding a job because even a minimum-wage gig flipping burgers or mopping floors meant the automatic loss of Medicaid benefits. That huge barrier to employment fell in December when President Clinton signed the Workers Incentives Improvement Act, clearing the path for states to change Medicaid laws to let the disabled hang on to much-needed benefits while entering the workforce. The move comes none too soon. Already, temporary agency Manpower Inc. is raiding the ranks of the disabled to fill its employee rolls. The National Disability Council reports a 50% jump in requests for workers with disabilities from companies as diverse as Merrill Lynch & Co. and Microsoft Corp. In fact, Microsoft is so eager to hire such workers that the software company is spearheading the Able to Work program, a consortium of 22 businesses scrambling to find the best ways to place disabled people in jobs. Says Microsoft's director of diversity, Santiago Rodriguez: "Until now, the whole country has been at a loss as to how to do this." To many advocates for the disabled, this confusion is a disappointment. The ADA was passed with great hopes of creating jobs and access for America's disabled population of 54 million. It prohibited employers from refusing to hire qualified applicants who also had disabilities. It also mandated that the disabled have access to telecommunications equipment and public transportation. But the barriers standing between most people with disabilities and a good, solid job haven't exactly been wiped out by employee sensitivity training courses and curb-cut accessible sidewalks. Those and other strides have helped, but problems still abound. Cities such as Chicago and New Orleans face lawsuits for failing to bring their public transportation systems into compliance. There are also, disability advocates say, still too many lawsuits like the one brought on behalf of a mentally retarded janitor, Don Perkl, who loved scrubbing toilets for Chuck E. Cheese in Madison, Wis. A district manager, a lawsuit alleges, fired him after saying "we don't hire people like that." The pizza parlor's local manager and two other employees quit in protest because they claimed the perennially upbeat Perkl was doing such a stellar job. Last year, a jury in

federal court in the Western District of Wisconsin agreed with them, slapping the company with \$13 million in punitive damages--the largest ADA award ever for a single plaintiff. A judge is still reviewing the jury's verdict. Chuck E. Cheese claims that Perkl "wasn't dismissed due to his disability but because he couldn't perform the job," says company spokesman Jon Rice.

LAWSUITS ON THE FRINGE. Plenty of other lawsuits brought under the ADA have caused critics to question its scope. Some worry that the act is not broad enough, pointing to a recent Supreme Court ruling that established that people with treatable disabilities don't qualify for protection. Others say the ADA is straying into the realm of the absurd, noting such cases as the employee with bad body odor who argued she should be protected from getting fired because her glandular problem qualified her as disabled. But most of the country's workers with disabilities face challenges that are far more clear-cut: They are deaf, blind, paralyzed, or emotionally impaired. Some have been burdened with disabilities since they were born. Others, like Booz, Allen & Hamilton Inc. principal Jeffrey Schaffer, are new to the minority--a group that one in three people will be a part of during their lives. Three years ago, Schaffer's car was in a head-on collision with another vehicle that swerved into his lane on a windy back road in West Virginia. It took paramedics an hour to cut him from the wreckage. After learning he would be confined to a wheelchair, Schaffer says, the thought of returning to work was the thing that kept him going. "Getting back to work was critical to my sense of well-being," says Schaffer from the bed of a hospital where he has just undergone his sixth operation since the accident. "Work ends up being a defining characteristic for self-worth." For worker-starved companies, spreading that kind of self-worth around is looking more and more like the only answer to today's labor-shortage woes.

Still, the real test will be when the economy cools and companies can afford to get picky about choosing between applicants with disabilities and everyone else. By then, though, it may be a lot harder to tell the difference.