

HOW TO CHOOSE
AN
ACCESSIBILITY CONSULTANT



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SELECTING A DISABLED INDIVIDUAL TO WORK AS AN ADA CONSULTANT

The Self Evaluation Process

The Americans with Disabilities Act which went into effect on January 26, 1992 requires all businesses to evaluate their services, programs and products so that they are provided in an accessible manner to all customers whether they be able-bodied or disabled. Each business should conduct a self-evaluation to identify any problem areas found in the facility or services. Such problems may include a narrow doorway, a high counter or steps at the entry. Once the evaluation has been completed the owner of the property is required to determine what modifications are "readily achievable" ("...able to be accomplished without much difficulty or expense..."). Since "expensive" is a relative measure dependant upon the size and profitability of the business, what is "readily achievable" will change from one business to another. A fair amount of discussion is necessary to determine the most appropriate and cost effective means of modifying facilities and complying with the "readily achievable" requirements.

In enacting The Americans with Disabilities Act, the US Congress never envisioned that every possible modification would be made to every commercial building. Instead, the law allows alternative measures to be taken that would, in the short or long run, allow a public accommodation to provide services without necessarily having to make the building be physically accessible. There are generally four ways to accommodate people who have limitations in their use of the environment:

- Architectural modifications to buildings,
- The use of equipment that assists the person,
- Changes in the activity to allow wider participation,
- Individual services or assistance from some other person.

The problem faced by most businesses is knowing how to selectively make these accommodations so as to minimize the cost and maximize the benefit to customers who are disabled. To determine this it is often best to seek the advice of those customers who have disabilities. After all they have had a lifetime of experience working with their disabilities and accommodating inaccessible environments.

How to choose a consultant

It is true that just as being a car driver does not make one an expert in repairing cars, neither does being disabled make one an expert in the ADA. Because of this, it is important to locate individuals who can be productive in this process. Experience has shown that the following criteria can be helpful.

- 1) Individuals who are involved in local disability organizations representing a large population rather than simply speaking for themselves can often keep a broad perspective on the needs of many types of disabling conditions rather than just their own disability.

- 2) The Federal government has developed various training programs for disabled individuals. These training programs have been run by the National Institute on Disability Research and Rehabilitation and through the Regional Disability and Business Accommodation Centers. Participation in one of these programs would indicate that an individual has been trained in the content and intent of the ADA and would thus have a better handle on the letter and spirit of the regulation.
- 3) Experience in the past with architectural barrier removal or building codes can be useful experience since it sensitizes the individual to the realities of compromise necessary in the construction process.
- 4) Disabled people who own or operate businesses, or have experience working with businesses, may be more knowledgeable about the needs and economic difficulties faced by businesses.
- 5) Individuals who have a construction or building background may have a special advantage in this area since oftentimes they understand the implications of architectural modifications, their costs and their difficulties.

There is no perfect person to work on a project. For that reason a group of disabled consultants representing various disabilities may be best. You should look for somebody with whom you can develop a rapport and who can offer insights into the needs and functional abilities of disabled people. By developing a long term relationship, the "continuing responsibility" requirement of the ADA can be achieved when your business institutes new products, services, programs or facilities. The local resources can be called upon to evaluate these programs before they are implemented to insure that they can provide the greatest amount of accommodation to the widest range of individuals.