

many wish they had a job.⁶⁰ The percentage of working-age Americans with disabilities is projected to increase due to a variety of factors including the aging of the population, medical advances, and U.S. involvement in the war in Iraq.⁶¹ The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed by Congress in 1990 and put into effect in 1992, requires that organizations make their buildings and workplaces accessible to the disabled and provide accommodations to enable disabled employees to do their jobs.⁶² However, employment rates of people with disabilities have actually declined in recent years. As profiled in the following Ethics in Action, Habitat International's commitment to social responsibility and diversity has both provided employment opportunities for disabled working age people in Chattanooga, Tennessee, while at the same time enabling the company to flourish.⁶³

ETHICS IN ACTION

Disabled Employees Key to Success at Habitat International

Habitat International, a manufacturer and contractor of indoor-outdoor carpet and artificial grass and supplier to major home-improvement companies such as The Home Depot and Lowe's, was founded around 30 years ago by CEO David Morris, and his father Saul.⁶⁴ Habitat has an enviable track record of success. A profitable company, the factory's defect rate is lower than one-half percent, and there have been less than 20 carpets that have been cut incorrectly in the company's entire history, even though during its peak months from January to June, some 15,000 rugs are produced daily.⁶⁵

Morris is the first to acknowledge that Habitat's employees are responsible for his company's success. Interestingly enough, about 75 percent of Habitat's employees (including some managers) have either a mental or physical disability or both kinds of disabilities.⁶⁶ When plant manager Connie Presnell filled a rush order by assigning it to a team of her fastest workers, each of them had some sort of disability (e.g., Down's syndrome, schizophrenia, cerebral palsy).⁶⁷ Throughout the years, Habitat also has provided employment opportunities to the homeless, alcoholics who are recovering, and refugees from other countries who do not speak English. Habitat's employees are paid competitive wages for the kind of work they do and absence and turnover rates at Habitat are very low. The company is sensitive to its employees' needs and provides them with the accommodations that they need to perform their jobs effectively, which results in a win-win situation.⁶⁸

While Habitat has gained some accounts due to its commitment to diversity, the company's ethical values and social responsibility have also led it to forego a major account. In terms of the latter, Morris became very angry several years ago when representatives of a distribution

company made disparaging comments about his employees (out of their earshot). While the head of the company called and apologized, the same thing happened again (after the apology was made) and Morris dropped the account. It took Habitat two years to regain the revenues it lost from that account and Morris has no regrets.⁶⁹ All in all, Habitat's commitment to diversity and social responsibility has enabled the company to flourish and has provided employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Chattanooga, Tennessee.⁷⁰



Habitat International Inc.

Habitat International's commitment to social responsibility and diversity has provided numerous employment opportunities for disabled working-age people in Chattanooga, TN, and has enabled the company to flourish. Approximately 75 percent of Habitat's employees have some kind of disability.