



HOW TO TURN YOUR BUSINESS INTO A MORE **INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE**

Hiring people with disabilities is often easier and more cost-effective than you might think, plus it helps strengthen both your team and workplace culture. Our Tennessee Businesses for the Better Inclusive Workplace Guide offers practical guidance to help you build a more accessible, inclusive, and successful workplace for everyone.



Tennessee Businesses for the Better is an initiative of the Tennessee Disability Coalition, which highlights companies taking practical steps to better serve Tennesseans with disabilities and helps educate businesses on inclusive practices. With over a million Tennesseans living with a disability, inclusion is not just the right thing to do; it is the smart business decision, too.



The Tennessee Disability Coalition is an alliance of organizations and individuals across Tennessee who work together to improve the lives of Tennesseans with disabilities.



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INCLUSIVE BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT: GRESHAM SMITH

Gresham Smith, a Nashville-based architecture and engineering firm with 25 offices nationwide, has made inclusion central to its success. Guided by their mission to plan, design, and consult to create healthy, thriving communities, the firm recognizes that strong communities start with a strong workplace culture. At Gresham Smith, inclusion is more than a value; it is part of how the firm operates.

To support their employees, Gresham Smith launched its Well-Being Employee Resource Network (ERN)—an employee-led initiative focused on mental health, accessibility, and inclusion. The ERN gives employees a safe space to share experiences, find resources, and connect across shared challenges.

For many, the ERN has been transformative. Employees have found community, understanding, and gained the confidence to speak openly about things like neurodiversity and sensory needs. These conversations have helped normalize differences in the workplace.

“When people feel seen, heard, and supported, they do their best work—and that’s good for business,” says Kelly Knight Hodges, Executive Vice President at Gresham Smith.

The firm’s commitment extends beyond conversation. From recruitment through onboarding, accessibility is prioritized. Each new hire completes an ergonomic assessment to ensure their workspace supports their needs, exemplifying that inclusion is built into operations, not added later.

The results speak for themselves. Employees who feel supported are more engaged and innovative, leading to stronger project outcomes and deeper client relationships.

For business owners, Gresham Smith offers a clear takeaway: **inclusion is not an additional cost; it is an investment in people, performance, and sustainable growth.**



WHAT ARE TENNESSEE BUSINESSES FOR THE BETTER?

Tennessee Businesses for the Better (TNB4B) are companies that have taken meaningful steps to serve and hire Tennesseans with disabilities, making inclusion a priority for both their customers and their workforce.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE INCLUSIVE?

Inclusion Begins with Hospitality

- At the heart of inclusive business is a simple idea: Everyone deserves to feel welcome and supported. That feeling matters to customers, clients, and employees, regardless of whether they have a disability.

Serving Every Customer

- Roughly 1 in 4 Americans live with a visual, physical, cognitive, or auditory disability. That means every business already serves customers with disabilities, whether they know it or not.
- Making your space and services more welcoming is not just the right thing to do; it is a smart way to serve your entire community.

Supporting Your Team

- In today's competitive talent market, inclusion is a key part of attracting and keeping great employees.
- Simple, thoughtful steps like flexible scheduling for healthcare needs or accessible onboarding can help create a workplace where everyone thrives.

Small Changes Have Big Impacts

- Many inclusive practices are low-cost or even free. For example:
 - Adding braille signage for visually impaired customers
 - Offering flexible work hours for employees with disabilities
 - Ensuring accessible entrances and websites
- These efforts are not just good practice; they can also strengthen customer loyalty, team morale, and your bottom line.

Inclusion is Good Business

- When businesses lead with hospitality and inclusion, everyone benefits. Inclusion is not extra, it is good business.

WHY SHOULD YOU MAKE YOUR BUSINESS MORE INCLUSIVE?

People with disabilities are part of every community, including your customers and your team.



Did you know that while 1 in 4 Americans has a disability, the number rises to 1 in 3 in Tennessee?

Inclusive practices foster stronger relationships, turning customers into loyal advocates while boosting productivity, retention, and overall satisfaction. When all employees, with and without disabilities, feel supported, morale and performance improve, driving success across the organization. That's why inclusion is not just nice to have; it is a smart investment.

WHAT DOES INCLUSION LOOK LIKE IN THE WORKPLACE?

- Committing to teamwork, professionalism, and mutual respect, especially across differences.
- Recognizing that employees do not have to be friends or socialize outside of work to work effectively together.
- Communicating clearly, collaborating effectively, and staying focused on shared business goals.
- Building an inclusive culture from day one by ensuring onboarding processes are accessible and welcoming to employees with disabilities.
- Understanding that most workplace accommodations are simple and affordable. Most workplace accommodations are either free or cost less than \$500—often less than the price of two computer monitors. (*Source: Job Accommodation Network*)
- Approaching inclusion like adding any new team member. It takes time, patience, and consistent practice.

ADVANTAGES OF HAVING AN INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE:

Employees with disabilities do the same work, and often better. When you make your workplace more inclusive, you will see:

- Equally qualified and credentialed employees
- Improved employee creativity
- Improved cultural insight
- Improved employee engagement
- Increased productivity
- Improved reputation
- Lower absentee rate
- Positive impacts from the bottom line up
- Reduced employee turnover



BUSINESSES THAT HIRE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES MAY QUALIFY FOR ADDITIONAL TAX INCENTIVES

Businesses that hire people with disabilities may qualify for certain federal and state tax incentives.



Federal Tax Incentives:

- **Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC):** A federal tax credit available to employers who invest in American job seekers who have consistently faced barriers to employment. Employers may meet their business needs and claim a tax credit if they hire an individual who is in a WOTC targeted group.
- **Disabled Access Credit:** For small businesses that incur costs to remove barriers and provide accessibility for customers and employees with disabilities.
- **Barrier Removal Tax Deduction:** For businesses removing architectural and transportation barriers that impede individuals with disabilities, e.g., installing lifts in company vehicles.

State Tax Incentives:

- **Job Tax Credit:** A standard job tax credit is available to taxpayers who invest in Tennessee and create jobs as a result of the investment. The business must file a business plan in order to qualify. Available through the Tennessee Department of Revenue, this credit supports businesses that employ individuals with disabilities.



INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES REQUIRE INTENTIONAL ACTION

Creating an inclusive workplace requires clear communication and a commitment to valuing and supporting everyone. Here are some things you can do to help make your business more inclusive.

- **Normalize Integrated Teams:** Foster a culture where all employees of all ages and abilities can work together as part of a unified team.
- **Communicate Your Commitment:** Clearly express your dedication to disability inclusion with company policies, communications, publications, and hiring materials.
- **Establish an Inclusion Advisory Group:** Assemble a team of employees with disabilities to help guide efforts around recruiting, hiring, retention, and advancement of people with disabilities.
- **Take Intentional Action:** Actively recruit, hire, retain, and promote individuals with disabilities through inclusive and accessible practices.
- **Encourage Open Feedback:** Create safe, confidential ways for employees to share feedback and identify barriers without fear of negative consequences.
- **Offer Workplace Flexibility and Accommodations:** Provide reasonable accommodations and flexible work options for all applicants and employees, including telework options, when appropriate.

INCLUSIVE HIRING STARTS WITH ACCESS



Inclusive hiring is not complicated; it just takes a few thoughtful steps to ensure everyone has a fair chance. If you want to hire the right person for the job, the first step is making sure all qualified candidates can access and apply for it. You can make your hiring practices more inclusive by:

- **Communicating Your Commitment to Inclusion:** Use inclusive language in all recruitment materials, job postings, and social media, focusing on the essential skill set required for the role.
- **Making Applications and Interviews Accessible:** Include a field such as “Accommodations needed to apply” and provide contact information for applicants to request accommodations like alternative formats that may be needed during the hiring process.
- **Training Your Hiring Team:** Invest in training on inclusive practices and unconscious bias to help create a level playing field for all candidates throughout the hiring process.
- **Taking Proactive Steps to Source Qualified Candidates with Disabilities:** Explore work-based learning opportunities like internships and apprenticeships to build a diverse talent pipeline. Gather feedback from other employers and hiring teams, like those in your local Chamber of Commerce.
- **Staying Informed on Disability-Related Employment Laws:** Make sure you are acquainted with applicable laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to support compliance and inclusion throughout your hiring process.

WHAT IS THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA)?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including **employment**. It is important for employers to know:

Under Title I of the ADA, employers with 15 or more employees are required to:

- **Avoid Discrimination** in hiring, promotions, pay, and all other employment practices based on disability.
- **Provide Reasonable Accommodations** to qualified applicants or employees with disabilities, unless it causes undue hardship.
- **Work Collaboratively with the Individuals** to identify suitable accommodations when a request is made.

ADA compliance is not just about avoiding lawsuits; it is about building an inclusive, productive workplace that supports all employees.

ARE TENNESSEE EMPLOYERS REQUIRED TO HIRE OR RETAIN AN INDIVIDUAL WITH A DISABILITY, EVEN IF THEY ARE NOT QUALIFIED?

No. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires a person with a disability to be qualified for a position to be considered for employment. To be considered qualified, the individual must be able to perform the essential functions of the job **with or without reasonable accommodations**.

Essential functions are the core duties of a position that are fundamental to the role and the reason the job exists. Factors that help determine whether a function is essential include:

- Whether the position exists specifically to perform that function.
- The number of other employees available to perform the same job duties.
- The expertise or skill required to perform the essential functions.

WHO IS CONSIDERED AN “INDIVIDUAL WITH A DISABILITY” UNDER THE ADA?

An individual is considered to have a disability under the ADA if they have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. This definition qualifies them to request and receive reasonable accommodations in the workplace.

ARE EMPLOYEES REQUIRED TO DISCLOSE THEIR DISABILITY?

No. Employees do not have to disclose a disability unless they request a reasonable accommodation or if the disability is obvious.



Employers may not always be aware of an employee's disability, which is why cultivating a culture of inclusion that supports everyone is essential.

WHAT IS A “REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION” UNDER THE ADA?

A reasonable accommodation is any modification to the application process, job duties, how the work is performed, or the work environment that enables a qualified individual with a disability to perform the essential functions of the job and access equal employment opportunities.

An accommodation is considered “reasonable” as long as it does not cause an undue hardship for the employer or pose a direct threat to the health or safety of the individual or others.

DO ALL EMPLOYERS HAVE TO PROVIDE REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS?

Under the ADA, employers with 15 or more employees are generally required to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities.

- **In Tennessee**, ADA requirements apply the same as at the federal level. However, state or local laws may offer additional protections. Employers should review both federal and state requirements to ensure full compliance.

Are reasonable accommodations expensive?

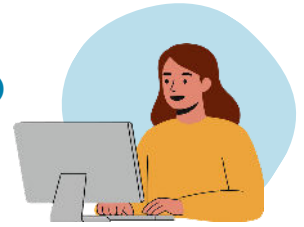
- Often, no. According to the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), a program funded by the U.S. Department of Labor:
 - 59% of accommodations cost nothing to implement.
 - Most others involve a one-time cost of under \$500—less than the cost of a typical dual-monitor setup for a computer.
 - Employers also reported that many accommodations resulted in financial benefits, such as reduced turnover, lower training and insurance costs, and increased employee productivity.

Need help with an individual accommodation request?

- Contact the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) for free, expert guidance:
 - 1-800-526-7234 (Voice)
 - 1-877-781-9403 (TTY)
 - [AskJAN.org](https://askjan.org)



ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS & RESOURCES TO HELP MAKE YOUR BUSINESS MORE INCLUSIVE



Applicable Laws and Regulations:

- **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**: prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities and requires reasonable accommodations to ensure equal access in employment, public services, and facilities.
- **ADA Amendments Act of 2008**: clarified the definition of disability to provide greater protection and easier access to accommodations for individuals under the original ADA.
- **Rehabilitation Act of 1973**: prohibits disability discrimination in federally funded programs and provides vocational services to support employment and independence.
- **Section 504**: prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance, ensuring they have equal access and opportunities.
- **Section 508**: requires federal agencies to make their electronic communications and technology accessible to people with disabilities, ensuring equal access to websites, software, and digital communications.
- **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**: federal law that helps job seekers, including people with disabilities, access training, education, and employment services to build skills and improve career opportunities.
- **Tennessee Disability Act**: prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in employment, ensuring they have equal opportunities unless their disability prevents job performance.

Helpful Links:

- [American Job Centers – Career One-Stop Business Center](#)
- [Department of Labor – Office of Disability Employment Policy](#)
- [Disability Employment Initiative](#)
- [Disability Etiquette Guide – How to Connect with People with Disabilities](#)
- [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion](#)
- [Hire Gauge – Think Beyond the Label](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\)](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\) For Employers](#)
- [Southeast ADA Center – Employment Resources](#)
- [Southwest ADA Center – Employer Portal](#)
- [Tennessee Smart Start – Business Resources](#)
- [The Tennessee Technology Access Program \(TTAP\)](#)
- [Vocational Rehabilitation – Business Services](#)
- [Website Accessibility Compliance: WCAG 2.0 and 508 Standards](#)



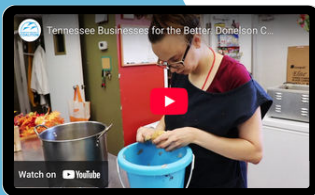
TENNESSEE BUSINESSES THAT HAVE ALREADY TAKEN STEPS TOWARDS INCLUSIVITY:



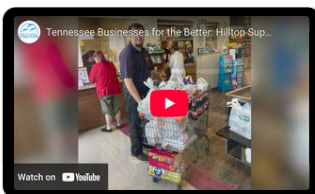
Gresham Smith, a full-service architecture and engineering firm based in Nashville, is creating a positive, inclusive environment for both their team and clients.



Five Points Pizza, a locally owned and operated Nashville restaurant, is creating a dining experience that is welcoming and inclusive for all customers to enjoy.



Donelson Cafe and Catering is making a difference by partnering with transition students to foster inclusion and create new opportunities in their community.



Hilltop Supermarket, a family-owned grocery store in Clarksville, TN, is creating an inclusive workplace with help from **Progressive Directions, Inc.'s** supported employment services.



YMCA Chattanooga uses inclusive business practices to help create a more welcoming community for all.



READY TO BE MORE INCLUSIVE?

There are several ways to get involved with Tennessee Businesses for the Better and the Tennessee Disability Coalition.

- **Educational Consultation:** Ready to make inclusivity a priority? We offer private consultations with your leadership team to help you go beyond basic ADA compliance and create a more welcoming environment for customers and employees with disabilities.
- **Advocacy Engagement:** Interested in supporting public policy that impacts Tennesseans with disabilities? Join us in our advocacy efforts. We provide toolkits to help you engage customers, connect with legislators, and make your voice heard.
- **Tennessee Businesses for the Better Award:** This statewide recognition highlights businesses that lead in employing and serving Tennesseans with disabilities through thoughtful practices, accessible environments, and opportunities for all.
- **Keep up with Disability Policy in Tennessee:** Join our TDC email list to get updates on disability policy and stay informed on what's happening across the state. You can sign up on our website: tndisability.org/subscribe/

CONTACT US!

If you would like to learn more about Tennessee Businesses for the Better and how your business can be more inclusive, visit our website at tndisability.org/tennessee-businesses-better or reach out to us at b4b@tndisability.org





@tndisability

www.tndisability.org

THE TENNESSEE DISABILITY COALITION

The Tennessee Disability Coalition is an alliance of organizations and individuals joined to promote the full and equal participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life.

To support this mission, the Coalition offers the following programs:

- **Public Policy Program** advocates for good public policy for people with disabilities and their families.
- **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Program** offers resources, training, and technical assistance regarding the ADA, along with information that goes beyond the basic minimal standards for compliance.
- **Family Voices of Tennessee** provides information, training, and assistance to families as they navigate service systems.
- **WorkAbleTN** helps individuals with disabilities explore how employment goals may impact Federal and State benefits.
- **Brain Links** brings together professionals to recognize the far-reaching and unique nature of brain injury and improve services for survivors.
- **Discretionary Small Grants Program** awards funds to projects and non-profit organizations to help build capacity in the disability community.

We rely on grassroots support from individuals and families across the state. In addition to their contributions, we have a formal membership of 40+ organizations.

Organizational Membership – If your organization would like to join the Coalition, please contact us at 615-383-9442 or coalition@tndisability.org.