

Hook! Hiring the Handicapped

By T. Scott Gross

Captain Hook was handicapped. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, if Captain Hook applied for a job, you would be required to make "reasonable accommodations." Perhaps an automatic plank and a few disposable deck hands might also be helpful.

When it comes to writing about the handicapped or hiring them, it's impossible to miss the fact that other than their medical disability, most handicapped folks are ordinary people. Ordinary people don't usually make for interesting articles. But then, maybe that's the point.

His name is Jimmy. He has spent most of his life in sheltered workshops for the learning disabled. He is strong, friendly, eager to please and at first meeting, very shy. He was also my employee.

When we first shook hands, Jimmy turned his head completely away, unable to look at me directly. With each question, he would quickly look in my direction, flash his biggest, winning smile and just as quickly turn away again.

His answers then were staccato bursts of one or two words that he would bark to my attention. Jimmy must have felt as if he had been born with a limited supply of words. He never wasted them and he sometimes appeared irritated when others did. His conversation, if you could call it that, was always

meaningful and even though it was over in only a heartbeat or so, you sensed it to be warm and friendly.

I knew immediately that Jimmy would fit just fine. My last question was, "Is there anytime that you just can't work?"

"Mondays", was the immediate reply, the word leaping out behind some mysterious pressure that had instantly formed behind Jimmy's powerful "m" sound.

"Okay. Mondays it is. If you want the job, it's yours."

"Thank you," he exploded and this time left an extra milli-second for an extra big ** smile. Then he *turned to report to his peers.

"Yes!" he hissed, arms stabbing the air above him.

Jimmy looked like an Olympic athlete, built by nature for the wrestling team but filled with the exuberance of a gymnast.

We could just barely hear his second exclamation. He disappeared.

"Yes! I got the job!"

For just a moment, I couldn't help but feel awed at my ability to create such unbridled joy with only a few ordinary words.

Our experience has been extraordinarily ordinary. Jimmy was always on time. Always in uniform. Always moving. Always friendly. Always.

I don't think he would have done well on the cash register. He didn't think quite fast enough. But he turned

out to be a super baker and a constant cleaner-upper.

Unlike other handicapped employees we've had, Jimmy was not much for meeting the public.

That's not to say that he could not handle public contact. Jimmy, like anyone else, has his strengths and weaknesses. He has his own personality. His is a private soul.

We held a small employee Christmas party. Of course, Jimmy was invited. His mother brought him to the door and stared anxiously at the crew.

"What time should I pick him up?" she asked.

"We'll bring him home," someone said, an answer that obviously made her uncomfortable.

"You don't mind?" It was more a test than a question.

On the way home, we had a chance to get to know Jimmy a little better. I had been curious to know why Jimmy had been so quick to ask for Mondays off.

"Golf!" was his air-burst answer.

"Golf?"

"Golf!" followed by a pause to see if that would satisfy me. "I golf every Monday."

"Are you any good at it?" I asked, thinking to myself how nice it would be to have every Monday free to do whatever I wanted.

"Sure!"

It figured.

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Our first handicapped employee was Lora. Lora

knew everyone in the entire western hemisphere. She hugged them, too. We miss seeing our guests get hugged by Lora but she moved on to a better job with more hours and higher pay. A competitor recruited her!

Isn't that a hoot? From unemployable to highly desirable.

Once you've hired a handicapped worker you will always be puzzled when people use words like "handicapped" and "disabled."

You'll know for certain that those words don't mean what they used to mean. In fact, it hasn't been too long since those words were just plain mean. Maybe we're all growing up.

So there you have it. An article with a hook...and a lesson!