

# **Visual impairment should not be a barrier to employment**

**by Kirk Adams, President and CEO  
of the American Foundation for the Blind**

I was 5 years old when I lost my vision. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act had not yet passed, so I was not guaranteed an education in my local public school. You went to a special school and learned the blindness skills you needed, which is exactly what I did. By fourth grade, after learning Braille and how to use a white cane, I transferred to public school.

I did well academically, graduating Phi Beta Kappa with a bachelor's in economics. I began applying for jobs, getting phone interviews and requests for in-person meetings. I'd walk in with my white cane and my Braille, and ultimately, would not get an offer.

It's difficult for a blind person to land a job, even with stellar qualifications. A blind person with an associate degree is statistically less likely to be employed than a sighted high school dropout. Often, employers who don't have experience working with people with disabilities can't conceptualize how a disabled candidate can perform the job's duties. As Helen Keller once said, "The chief handicap of the blind is not blindness, but the attitude of seeing people toward them."

These ungrounded fears contribute to the persistently low employment rates for people who are visually impaired: Roughly seven out of 10 working-age blind people aren't in the workforce, meaning employers are missing out on the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, including improvements in profitability, competitive advantage and innovation.

After all those unsuccessful in-person interviews, I changed my strategy. I was upfront in the cover letter: I've been blind since age 5, these are the tools I use, here is how I would do the job.

With that, I couldn't even get a phone interview.

I cast my net wider. I applied to a small brokerage firm in Seattle, where the sales manager was a fellow Whitman College alum and economics major. He called some of the professors we'd both had, and they said, "He can do the job."

My career had finally begun. I spent 10 fruitful years at the firm. However, something was missing. Upon serious reflection, I realized I wanted to work in the nonprofit sector, for an organization that helped blind people. I got my start as a fundraiser for the Seattle Public Library Foundation, raising money for the statewide Talking Book and Braille Library. I returned to school and earned a master's in nonprofit leadership from Seattle University. My path eventually led me to The Lighthouse for the Blind Inc. in Seattle, as the organization's first blind CEO. Eight years later, I became the sixth president and CEO of the American Foundation for the Blind.

At the foundation, employment for blind people is among our highest priorities. We want to ensure blind children are prepared for the workforce, blind teenagers and adults have the opportunities they need to excel in their chosen fields, and people who lose vision later in life can remain in the workforce or volunteer in their communities.

At a time when we're seeing a rise in discrimination complaints and firings of disabled federal workers, it is paramount that we work together to improve these dismal statistics.

But we cannot do this alone. What can you do? Visit [AFB.org/employment](https://www.afb.org/employment) to keep up on the latest disability employment research. Become an

advocate for inclusive design — make sure your website, products and apps are fully accessible. Attend an upcoming employment summit, and the AFB Leadership Conference. If you're a visually impaired professional yourself, become a mentor.

And most important, commit to hiring and retaining blind employees. As an AFB colleague recently told Monster.com in an interview, blind employees are natural problem solvers who bring creativity and creative thinking to the work environment. We hope you'll join us in creating a world of no limits for workers who are blind or visually impaired.

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