

## DIVERSITY INCLUDES DISABILITY

Cingular Wireless rises to the challenge — by hiring and empowering those with disabilities.

by Jody Steinberg

“Cingular is unique in setting up an environment that asks, ‘What are your talents? What is your potential? Let’s maximize and develop them,’” says Susan Mazrui, director of federal regulatory affairs for Cingular Wireless.

“As a woman with a disability, this is the best environment I have ever worked in,” explains Mazrui, who uses a Braille printer and whose door nameplate greets visitors in highly visible text and Braille. “My opinions are valued. I’m treated with respect and that is the norm, not the exception.”

As corporations reeling from discrimination lawsuits seek ways to recruit and retain talent, corporate diversity programs are sprouting up across Atlanta. Cingular, which trades on the message of self-expression, opened its doors three years ago with an inclusive diversity policy at its core. Putting that ethos to work includes innovative strategies targeting customers and employees with disabilities, and it has reaped recognition and awards from disability and diversity circles nationwide.

“Our picture of diversity includes everyone,” explains Bob Reed, vice president of diversity. “It’s critical to honor what each individual brings to the work force and use that experience” to improve customer service.

Newcomer Dawn Benton sees career potential in a company where 30 percent of high-ranking executives and managers are women. “In my group, I see a high percentage of executive women, which tells me that there are many opportunities here for me,” says the regional public relations manager. The message is, “If I work hard, I can get where I want to be. I did not feel that way in places I’ve worked before.”

During October, Cingular hosts programs in conjunction with National Disabilities Employment Month & National Diversity Week. More than 100 potential workers will shadow Cingular employees on National Disability Mentoring Day. Cingular, which first hosted NDMD in 2001, anticipates the contacts could lead to jobs for some.

Only 30.4 percent of Americans with a disability are in the labor force, and 12.3 percent of them are unemployed. Women with disabilities, especially those with children, are most likely to receive welfare benefits. Cingular contributed to a fact-finding mission by the Office of Disability Employment Programs aimed at changing those statistics. However, many individuals with disabilities choose not to be identified, making it hard for corporations to accurately gauge the issues and the numbers of those with disabilities in the workplace.

The company uses technology to enhance communications — from products and services like voice access, to workplace accommodations such as large monitors, Braille printers and interpreters for the hearing impaired. One of the diversity-driven employee resource groups is virtual to decrease obstacles to participation and give employees with disabilities “the opportunity to feel valued, included and part of a group,” says Reed. To reinforce the sense of value, Cingular conducts an annual all-employee survey and results validate the company’s efforts to create an inclusive culture.

“Cingular does an excellent job of diversity ... internally and with service to customers,” Mazrui says. ♣

### FLEXIBILITY

- Flexible start times based on work load/performance, requires meeting availability. Benefits: Extensive package paid for full-time employees. Sliding scale co-pay for part-time based on hours.

### INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS

- Aggressive company-wide diversity program; jobs posted on jobaccess.org, targeting disability; Disability Access

Customer Service group; free voice dialing for persons with disabilities; Wireless Access Task Force; Braille billing program.

### FAMILY

- Healthcare; life/disability; savings and retirement; work and life benefits; education assistance. life events; same-sex partner and spouse benefits.

### NEW PARENTS

- Family Medical Leave Act — up to 12 weeks off for childbirth/adoption or health circumstances.

### WORK/LIFE BALANCE

- Advancement training; HR support for families with difficult home circumstances, such as caretakers; leave-of-absence policy; on-site facilities; lifecare.com support services; adoption and childcare assistance; charitable matching gifts.
- Employee resource groups support the diversity mission statement (work force, supplier, community and markets); disability awareness training for all employees.