

RICHARD DONOVAN



RELUCTANT ACTIVIST

When people find out Richard Donovan is a Columbia University MBA, trading equities for Merrill Lynch, their first question is, "How the hell did you do it?"

"It's not as big of a struggle as they think," says Donovan. "It's just something I accomplished because of the way I choose to live my life." Nonetheless, there's good reason to ask the question: Donovan suffers from cerebral palsy, which dramatically impairs his movement and speech. But it hasn't hindered him on the trading floor. As far as he's concerned, as long as he can deliver on the bottom line—which he does handsomely—his disability is irrelevant.

Donovan's philosophy of self-reliance has long made him wary of political activism. ("The word 'activist' conjures up the image of some guy in Birkenstocks," he says.) He accepted an invitation to join a March 2004 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission forum on corporate outreach and the disabled, but he had no particular relish for the assignment. A few weeks before his trip to Washington, D.C., though, he had a change of attitude. He and a friend were hanging out in a bar watching *The Apprentice*, and his buddy said, "Why don't you try out for that show?" The suggestion made Donovan realize that, in his ability to achieve his goals, he could serve as a role model to other people with disabilities. "That night I realized that ignoring the issue of disability was the wrong approach," he says. "I'm someone who can stand up and say, 'This is no big deal.'"

Donovan never made a stab at reality-show fame, but he plunged into his EEOC assignment with relish. ("A few years ago," he admits, "I couldn't have told you what the EEOC was!") True to form, his arguments were framed in business logic: Corporations should look to the disabled as an untapped pool of valuable talent. Donovan's a foe of what he calls "entitlist" policies. He doesn't think that people with disabilities are entitled to special treatment, just to the same opportunities as everyone else.

Activism? Donovan would say "no," but his commitment to his cause is undeniable. As he puts it: "I still don't see myself as a crusader, just someone that can show that success in corporate America is possible if you happen to be disabled. Nobody can argue results." ©

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