

Redefine Ability to Build a Better Workforce

MANAGEMENT CONNECTION



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Make no little plans. While this phrase is part of a famous quote by architect Daniel Burnham, it could easily have been the title of the keynote's presentation at a recent Employment Law Conference.

The session was titled "A Better Workforce Through Redefined Ability." Speaker Randy Lewis, a retired Senior Vice President for Walgreens, inspired the audience by sharing the story of how his big plans to remove barriers in the selection and hiring process at a Walgreens' Distribution Center resulted in lasting positive changes. In addition to the Center's culture changing for the better, absenteeism decreased,

and retention and safety also improved. By making adjustments instead of accommodations, individuals who would never have been offered a job are now gainfully employed, earning a living wage, and contributing to their workplaces and communities in meaningful ways.

Throughout the presentation, Lewis used examples of real people and their personal stories. He started by sharing the story of his own son with autism and explained how being his parent taught him not only to have patience, but to see a real person in spite of his son's challenges. Lewis revealed that helping his son and others like him attain meaningful full-time employment provided the

Continued on page 2



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Continued from page 1

catalyst for him to set lofty goals. Fortunately, Walgreens was willing to pilot the program and achieved such impressive results that government agencies and many other well-known corporations lent their support and/or followed suit. By forming strategic relationships with a wide array of partner organizations, including some that work with individuals with disabilities, companies are doing more than outsourcing project work to “enclaves” that keep differently-abled team members isolated from regular employees.

While Walgreens is a shining example of a company striving to improve the lives of those with disabilities, and benefiting from their strengths in the workplace, other large corporations also get high marks for their hiring practices and impressive programs for differently-abled people. Lowe’s, Procter & Gamble, UPS, Starbucks, and many others have been recognized for their initiatives. Both employers and employees have found great value in programs built on inclusion.

How about *your* organization? In a tight labor market, where there are often more jobs than workers, implementing

hiring practices and programs that welcome and encourage physically and/or intellectually challenged individuals may be a good solution. These individuals can perform many of the same jobs as those currently on your staff, and they should be held to established performance standards like all other employees. Their pay grade should be the same as others who do similar work. Differently-abled employees should work side by side with their peers after a thorough skills assessment and training period. Your workplace will reap the benefits from a culture of inclusion and acceptance. You should begin to see a kinder, gentler workplace while still achieving your departmental goals.

Where to start? Begin by consulting your facility’s Human Resources Department. Next, contact area agencies that serve people with disabilities. Then develop a plan. Familiarize yourself with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), legislation which prohibits discrimination. Your HR Department should be aware of what’s covered and what’s required in terms of reasonable workplace accommodations. Visit ada.gov to learn more. The ultimate goal should

DIFFERENTLY-ABLED

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be to provide meaningful employment for individuals of differing abilities.

When it comes right down to it, the workplace is made up of people with differing abilities anyway. Employee A may be a wiz at math, while Employee B struggles with numbers but has top-notch organizational skills. Don’t we tap into the differences and strengths of our employees every day? Our staff may also be made up of multiple generations, various ethnicities, unique personalities, and other differences that make an organization both interesting and more successful.

Continued on page 3

Continued from page 2

The speaker provided many simple but powerful tips. My personal favorite was ATP (i.e., ask the person). So many times, we try to guess what someone might need to be able to do a job or improve their performance. Wouldn't it make the most sense to just ask the person? By following this sage piece of advice, you will more quickly be able to ascertain whether something is possible or affordable. Lewis shared that in terms of adjustments (i.e., accommodations), the average cost is just \$15, which is far below what most hiring managers might imagine. This is just one example of how changing a process or a mindset can make a world of difference.

Of course, if you hire a person who utilizes a wheelchair, for example, set them up for success by ensuring your kitchen design can accommodate their chair. If someone has Asperger's Syndrome – a form of autism – social situations may be nerve-racking or debilitating, so ATP (ask the person) to discuss their level of comfort in certain scenarios. Respect their differences, tap into their strengths, and give them a work experience that is rewarding and inclusive.

Unfortunately, prejudice is alive and well. A 2016 study by Rutgers University and Syracuse University confirms that employers are more likely to discriminate against highly qualified job applicants who have disabilities than equally qualified candidates who do not. Researchers in the U.S. sent out more than 6,000 fictitious resumes and cover letters for advertised accounting jobs. The result? Employers expressed interest 26 percent less often in candidates who disclosed disabilities in their cover letters. The candidates with and without disabilities were equally qualified, and their disabilities would not have precluded them from doing the work required of them. Help break the cycle of discrimination that people with disabilities often experience.

If you are looking for other avenues to get the employees you need to staff your operation, retirees may also be a good option. Many retirees enjoy having a part-time position for a number of reasons. They desire to keep their mind and skills sharp, to contribute to a larger purpose, and to generate a modest income. These mature workers often possess institutional



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knowledge and can serve as excellent mentors for younger, less experienced staff.

Although Lewis is now retired from Walgreens, his work to expand employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities continues through NOGWOG Disability Initiative (NDI), an organization that assists businesses and communities. NOGWOG is short for No Greatness Without Goodness, which is also the title of his 2014 book. To learn more about NDI, visit www.jrandolphlewis.com. Other great resources abound if you're looking to start a hiring program for people with different abilities.

In his closing comments, Lewis asked the audience to imagine the best workplace we possibly could, and then challenged us to use our own power for good. Given the role that human resources and hiring managers play in the talent arena, there is no doubt in my mind that conference participants left motivated to make some impactful changes in their own organizations. With some thought and planning, you can too. **E**

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- Hiring differently-abled individuals can:
 - Enhance workplace culture
 - Benefit organizations in a tight labor market
 - Both of the above
- Physically or intellectually challenged individuals can benefit from inclusion programs that:
 - Provide meaningful work
 - Allow them to work side by side with their peers
 - Both of the above
- The pay grade for people with disabilities should be:
 - The same as that for other individuals doing similar work
 - Slightly less, knowing that their skills may not be as sharp
 - Significantly less, knowing that they may be slower at performing certain tasks
- What steps should organizations take to actively recruit individuals with disabilities?
 - Ask people you meet on the street with disabilities whether they want employment
 - Consult your HR Department or hiring manager and area agencies serving the disabled
 - Contact local physician's offices to see if they have special needs patients who are willing to work
- When hiring individuals with disabilities for your food service, you and/or your Human Resources Departments should have a basic understanding of what legislation?
 - Food Safety Modernization Act
 - Americans With Disabilities Act
 - FDA Food Code
- The acronym ATP described in this article stands for:
 - Accept the Problem
 - Analyze Their Performance
 - Ask the Person
- The Americans With Disabilities Act requires workplaces that employ differently-abled individuals to make:
 - Elaborate adjustments to the work environment
 - Reasonable accommodations to the work environment
 - No special changes

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