

An Entrepreneur's Perspective



by Christopher Loso

An untapped resource pool

Employers struggle every day to find, good, qualified people. A few years ago, I had difficulty filling positions in my commercial janitorial services company. I learned from colleagues about the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VocRehab Vermont) in the Vermont Agency of Human Services.

When I contacted VocRehab Vermont, I learned of a valuable, untapped resource pool that could address my hiring needs: people with disabilities. I shared the job description with the folks at VocRehab Vermont and they quickly found a qualified person for my position. I hired him and quickly realized the benefits gained through the quality of his work. His disability was not an issue. I was sold. Since 2011, I have hired eight more individuals with disabilities and plan to hire more as my business grows.

Many of my employees with disabilities have been working with me for over a year; one celebrates his third year in November. I monitor the work quality of all 75 of my employees and have found that my employees with disabilities perform at the same (or higher) quality service level as their non-disabled peers. Clients are pleased with the cleaning services they provide and support our staffing without hesitation. Hiring people with disabilities has held no risk for me.

The benefit of hiring people with disabilities is gaining national attention. In 2013, the National Governors Association issued a report entitled "A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities." It focused on a growing trend in the private sector led by Walgreens. Since 2007, the drugstore chain has hired those with disabilities, not just because it is the right thing, but also to gain a competitive marketplace advantage.

Studies of Walgreens' hiring strategy at its distribution centers, where at least a third of its employees are physically or developmentally disabled, show that disabled workers are as efficient as or more efficient and loyal than nondisabled workers. Absenteeism is down, turnover is less, and safety is improved.

Furthermore, the cost of accommodations using new technologies and education is minimal. According to a July 2013 Job Accommodation Network study, accommodations are often relatively easy and inexpensive to implement — in most cases \$500 or less. The study noted that 74 percent of people with disabilities say they need no special accommodations.

Despite the skills and positive attitude people with disabilities can bring to the workplace, here's the reality: Based on the U.S. Census Bureau 2012 American Community Survey, 11.6 percent of working-age Vermonters (over 46,000 individuals) have a disability, but only 15,900 of them are employed — a rate of just over 34 percent.

These statistics are mind-boggling. Nationally, the almost 50 million individuals with disabilities represent a diverse group of workers. They vary by education and training, physical and developmental abilities, and work experience. Perhaps more than any other group, they are adaptable to different situations and circumstances.

So how can you access this labor pool? Building partnerships is critical to finding individuals who have the specific skills you need. One resource is VocRehab Vermont (www.vocrehab.vermont.gov); 866-879-6757). It helps employers identify qualified, job-ready candidates with disabilities. You can also contact Creative Workforce Solutions, an initiative of the Agency of Human Services (www.cwsvt.com), to find a local business account manager to help you. Finally, the Vermont Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (GCEPD) can provide information on recruiting, hiring, and retaining qualified individuals with disabilities. Check out the GCEPD website at www.hireus.org for more information.

People with disabilities are a valuable talent pool waiting to be tapped, with a huge upside for businesses that take advantage of this hiring opportunity. Seek out the people with disabilities who can meet your staffing needs; you'll be glad you did. I am. ■

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