

Editorial

Opinion

Physio has positive experience in hiring of disabled workers

Many years ago, "they" told Herb he'd never be able to hold down a job. Our company took a chance and hired him anyway.

That was back in 1983, and I'm glad to say Herb proved "them" wrong. Nearly 16 years later, Herb is still with us.

Herb has a developmental disability.

All told, there are 10 developmentally disabled workers at Medtronic Physio-Control, and almost all have been there a dozen years or more.

They perform relevant, complex work and are held to the same quality and productivity standards as any other team member. And they all contribute to the bottom line.

How It All Began

In 1983 we were approached by two researchers at the University of Oregon about setting up a supported employment program.

Their goal was to show that people with severe to moderate developmental disabilities were capable of doing far more than was generally expected of them. Because no one else had tried anything like this before, it was a big risk for all of us.

With the help of Trillium Employment Services, we identified some manufacturing functions that could be performed by these individuals and rebundled those functions into full-time jobs.

Trillium, which is funded by state and county programs, supplied human resources and support services such as job coaching and diversity training.

We implemented the program gradually, hiring one person at a time toward our initial target of eight. We made extensive use of Trillium's services, on-site and off, especially that first year. Early on there was some turnover as we all learned how to successfully match jobs and people, but many of those first eight individuals are still there today.

The Right Thing To Do

Employing people with disabilities is a win-win-win situation for the employees, the employer and society in general.

Our supported employment program has just about the lowest turnover and absenteeism rates in the company. We get dedicated, productive employees, and we help them be-



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come financially self-sufficient and less dependent on government-funded aid.

The benefits far outweigh the costs. Vocational rehab programs underwrite services like Trillium's, as well as assistive equipment required by people with physical impairments.

All that's required is a willingness to think outside the box about how to do the work that needs to be done.

Whether that means hiring 10 new people full time, or just one part timer, it all adds up.

There are a lot more resources available today to assist employers than there were when we first took the plunge. The recently-formed Washington State Business Leadership Network (WSBLN) is one example.

An employer-led partnership of businesses, community service organizations, government agencies and others, the WSBLN will provide training and other resources to help employers recruit and retain employees — and customers — with disabilities.

All too often, people with developmental or other disabilities are sidelined as unemployable — to our detriment, as well as theirs. Especially today, with unemployment at its lowest level in decades, we can't afford to ignore the millions of Americans who are waiting only for the opportunity to show what they can do.

For more information on the WSBLN, contact Jill Deatherage at 206-361-5611.

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