

Editorial

PUGET SOUND BUSINESS JOURNAL AUGUST 8-14, 2003

Giving the disabled a chance

Her job as a library assistant at the Federal Aviation Administration in Renton has turned Mary Ewbank's life around.

Born with cerebral palsy, Ewbank was living in an adult family home and had just 14 cents in her pocket before joining the FAA 15 months ago.

Creditors "were calling me every single name in the book," she says.

Since joining the FAA, Ewbank now has her own apartment and lives a completely independent life.

Fully 15 percent of adults between the ages of 15 and 64 have some kind of disability, according to two recent state surveys.

During the period between 2000 and 2002, as the state economy plummeted, people with disabilities experienced larger declines in employment and wages than those without disabilities. The unemployment rate for persons with disabilities increased to 7 percent — a 35 percent jump.

The motivation for hiring someone with a disability shouldn't revolve around charity. Most businesses will readily accept their obligation to be socially responsible — if it benefits their bottom line. There's nothing wrong with that.

But to get to that point often re-

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK



Rob
Smith

quires a different way of thinking. "It can be very cost-effective," says Jonathan Hankins, an employment specialist with Auburn-based Trillium Employment Services, which for 20 years has worked to create employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities. "One of the big impacts to a business is they are getting an employee who really wants to do specific work. It can alleviate some of the routine tasks current staff are already doing that's currently burning out or overwhelming employees," Hankins says.

Average monthly take-home wage for the 3,608 people in the state who receive funding from the state Department of Developmental Disabilities is \$790 per month — not a lot, but enough to create a sense of self-worth and get them off welfare.

Trevor Irish, supervisor of all Seattle-Metro area Gold's Gym Clubs, has had such a positive experience with

Amber Decatur that he's encouraging other gym owners to follow his lead.

Decatur, who was born with Down syndrome, works at Gold's Renton gym cleaning machines, organizing magazines and folding towels. She's a big hit with both customers and colleagues.

"She requires minimal supervision, she has a great attitude, and members just love her," says Irish. "She always has a smile on her face and she's always the first to help."

Irish was first exposed to people with disabilities as a teacher's assistant in a special education class in high school. He realized then that people with disabilities had a lot to contribute, but often didn't get the opportunity.

"You've got to be flexible and it requires patience, but it pays off in a big way," he says. "I'd recommend (hiring a person with a disability) to anybody."

Time and time again, disabled employees have proven that their perceived limitations are no barrier to productivity. All they need is a chance.

ROB SMITH is managing editor of the Business Journal. Reach him at rsmith@bizjournals.com.