

## Employing a diverse workforce easier with new direction

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I'm sure the bottom of each of your job postings includes the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) clause. Briefly, EEO states that businesses will hire qualified applicants who can perform all requirements of the job with use of a reasonable accommodation. The EEO is an important effort for increasing the diversity of our workforce, especially for people with disabilities. Often traditional positions and today's screening processes are the barriers to real inclusion, which the EEO doesn't resolve. Truly equal employment requires more than a cookie-cutter job description and a caption; it takes a conscious evaluation of your business' needs and a new approach to hiring.

Companies are moving in new directions when they want to actively recruit people with disabilities into their teams. In Kitsap County, there are nearly a dozen employment agencies that specifically help companies recruit and train employees with intellectual disabilities. These agencies help companies identify labor gaps and think in fresh ways about bundling tasks into a new position that accelerates production, services and performance. Even better, these companies don't charge the fees of traditional staffing companies.

Recently, East Port Orchard Elementary School became one such employer. EPO hired Madelyn and Adam, two job-seekers with intellectual disabilities, through the support of Trillium Employment Services.

Madelyn was hired as a lunchroom monitor, and has also been a large help in the Food to Flowers compost program. With Madelyn's fun fashion sense, easy smile, and love of children she quickly became a valued member of the cafeteria team. Madelyn loves helping the children open lunch products, assisting the kids to sort lunch waste into compost and recycle containers, and helping keep order in the chaotic lunch hour.

Adam works as a library assistant, reshelving books, assisting students with checking out books, recovering and repairing damaged books, and preparing new books for students. Having his help in the library means that EPO's librarian has more time to work with students.

Paul Hulbert, principal at EPO, was instrumental in creating Adam and Madelyn's positions. By talking with his staff, Paul learned that additional help was always needed in the cafeteria and the library, and he worked alongside Dr. Michelle Reid, the South Kitsap School District superintendent, to meet these needs by creating two new part-time positions.

EPO effectively turned the process inside out. They didn't start with a job description and hope they could attract someone with a disability. They engaged Trillium to help them see where positions could be created and then to find the right person with the necessary skills.

"We really had those two needs, and they filled a gap that we had," Hulbert says. He recommends that other schools and businesses "really identify what you need, and then there are individuals out there that can help fill those needs. Think outside the box sometimes, because then it's a win-win for everybody." And as a school preparing students for success in the real world, "It's good for our students to embrace diversity, and it's a good example ... for all of our students here that it's a diverse population and we embrace and work with everybody," he says.

Engaging a specialized employment agency to help companies recruit employees with disabilities not only helps fill labor gaps and meet diversity goals, it can be the solution that helps your business shift from good to great. There are several other local companies that can and have testified to this. As one business manager, Wayne Harris (assistant store manager of the Silverdale Costco) says, "All it takes is a leap of faith. The reward greatly exceeds any effort"

*Jaymie Heberlein is a senior employment counselor with Trillium Employment Services, which specializes in providing job opportunities, training and retention for adults with disabilities. If your business is interested in learning more about these services, call her at 360-698-6659.*



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