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# Don't overlook potential of workers with disabilities

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American jobs are dominating the national conversation right now, and with good reason. But amid the political debates and pundit analysis, there's one segment of the labor market that's going largely ignored: Workers with disabilities.

Between the recession years of 2007 and 2009, the number of workers with disabilities -- as a percentage of all employed workers -- declined nearly 10 percent.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, those workers also tend to stay unemployed much longer than their non-disabled counterparts. And, they're at far higher risk of stress-related disorders and substance dependency.

This scenario is even more unfortunate when we consider that disabled workers represent a great untapped resource for American businesses.

By being aware of the potential of this workforce, employers can improve their businesses, give meaningful work to a very willing and well-trained set of workers, and enrich an entire community.

That's exactly what has happened with the highly successful partnership between the Corning Incorporated plant in Oneonta and The Arc Otsego.

About 18 months ago, we at Corning were giving the scrap plastic from our biomedical manufacturing operation to a recycler, who hauled it away. We learned we could actually sell that scrap plastic to a specialty recycler -- but it needed to be thoroughly sorted first, and we didn't have the space, equipment or staff to do it efficiently.

We turned to The Arc Otsego, where trained workers were already providing cardboard inserts for our product packaging. The Arc leadership enthusiastically agreed to invest in equipment and do training for the task.

Over the past year, workers at The Arc have sorted and prepped more than 100 trailer-loads of plastic for recycling. They do a terrific job. Corning pays for their services, providing a source of income for more than a dozen trainees, who rotate through the work-team weekly. And they're gaining skills and experience that can potentially prepare them for other jobs in the community.

When we visit the warehouse, the enthusiasm and pride of these workers is tangible.

Several other local businesses have set up similar collaborations, so the skill set of the Arc workforce continues to grow.

There's plenty of room for more.

I encourage all Oneonta-area businesses -- especially during October, which is National Disability Employment Awareness Month -- to reach out to the vocational training division of The Arc Otsego or other organizations that advocate for people with disabilities.

Because these agencies can be very flexible, they can often provide an excellent solution for just-in-time final assembly, packaging, sorting, and other necessary tasks.

The end result goes far beyond the assembly line and the warehouse.

It's reflected in the pride, sense of self-worth, and quality of life of people in our community -- people who, when given the opportunity to contribute, give back so much.

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