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BUSINESS

Workers with disabilities are assets

For The Daily Times

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When you walk into a store and realize that one or more of the people working there has a disability, how does that make you feel? Business owners used to think coming across such an individual would make their customers uncomfortable, but a new study directed at consumers finds the opposite to be true.

Of the 800 plus people polled in the survey designed by the University of Massachusetts Boston and conducted by the Gallup Organization for America's Strength Foundation, 92 percent said they felt more favorable towards companies that hire individuals with disabilities, while 87 percent said they prefer to give their business to companies that do so. "These findings are very significant because they show a shift in public thinking," said Neil Romano, the president and founder of America's Strength Foundation. "The study shows businesses that hiring someone with a disability goes way beyond being good for the company's image, it can positively impact the bottom line."

ADVERTISEMENT Perhaps one of the country's best examples of a company that "gets this concept" is Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. There are about 100 employees with disabilities working in departments throughout the hospital - all excelling at complex jobs most people thought they'd never be able to do.

Annie Sublett, a young woman with Downs Syndrome, is one of them. She has spent the past 10 years working as the instrument sterilizer at the hospital's dental clinic.

"It's amazing to watch her," said Annie's supervisor, JoAnn Shumate. "She starts each day by disinfecting all the hand pieces used in the clinic the previous day, then once they're clean, she's also the one who repackages the instruments for the dentists and hygienists. I don't know how she does it, but she handles more than 100 instruments, and gets it right every time."

Head over to the hospital's emergency room, the post anesthesia care unit (PACU), or even the pharmacy and you'd think they had cloned Annie. "People with disabilities are not only succeeding but excelling at jobs in those departments too," said Erin Riehle, the hospital's director of disability services.

Riehle leads a department that has gained the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center international recognition. The facility is the largest employer of people with disabilities in the state of Ohio, and word is starting to get around that their employees are among the best in the country.

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"When people ask us what our secret is, we tell them there is no secret," said Riehle. "People with disabilities are simply the most dedicated employees there are. They genuinely want to do a good job and are willing to put in more effort than most people to get the job done."

"People with disabilities have tremendous value and potential. A little creative thinking on the part of the business can unlock that potential to their benefit, the benefit of people with disabilities and society as a whole," said Romano.

It seems more and more businesses are realizing this every day. "Hiring individuals with disabilities is, in fact, good for business," said CT Hill, chairman, president and CEO of SunTrust Banks Mid-Atlantic. "The return on investment to SunTrust can be measured in several ways. One, it helps our diversity initiatives, building a strong workforce; two, it helps us to develop products and services, expanding our customer base; and three, it enables us to reach out to our entire community. It's good for our shareholders and it's good for business."

"From a business standpoint, it only makes sense that companies which take the needs of people with disabilities into account, will earn themselves an edge in the marketplace," added Romano.

Other interesting statistics gathered through the study published in the January issue of the "Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation," 93 percent of participants said they feel companies that employ people with disabilities show their customers they care about all workers. Ninety-six percent said they think companies that employ people with disabilities help those individuals lead more productive lives.

For businesses interested in learning more about employing people with disabilities, the United States Chamber of Commerce (www.uschamber/cwp.com) and United States Business Leadership Network (www.usbln.com) are good resources to turn to for help and information.

For help identifying job accommodations for candidates and workers with disabilities, check out the Job Accommodation Network, a free service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy within the Department of Labor. Their Web site address is www.jan.wvu.edu.

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