



Distribution Center MANAGEMENT

Managing people, materials and costs in the warehouse or DC

Human Resources

Lowe's finds spiritual boost in hiring disabled workers in DCs

After Walgreens won accolades for hiring significant numbers of disabled workers in its distribution centers, Steve Szilagyi wondered if his company, Lowe's, could do the same.

As he began to study the idea, Szilagyi visited the Walgreens DC in Anderson, SC, where hundreds of disabled workers are employed.

"I was blown away by the culture and by what they were doing," says Szilagyi, senior vice president of distribution at Lowe's.

When Lowe's opened a new DC in Pittston, PA, the company committed to hiring workers with disabilities. In one example, a blind worker was so good at his job that he was quickly promoted to trainer. The man had been unemployed for 10 years before landing the job at Lowe's.

"All he wanted was a chance," Szilagyi says.

Szilagyi can't point to any bottom-line benefit to hiring people with disabilities. The workers earn the same pay as everyone else, and they're expected to meet the same performance levels. He sees the initiative as more of a psychic paycheck.

"This isn't charity. It's about finding people with talent," Szilagyi says. "Spiritually, morally, this is the right thing to do. This is teaching us how to help people be successful."

Meeting tough demands

Other DCs should follow the lead of Walgreens and Lowe's in hiring people with disabilities, says Meg O'Connell, director of corporate programs at the National Organization on Disability.

"Every company in America has diversity goals," O'Connell says. "Hiring people with disabilities should be part of your overall diversity program."

ARC of Luzerne County has helped place workers at the Lowe's DC in Pittston, and Executive Director Pamela Zotynia says these jobs are different from the make-work positions that employers often have given her clients in the past.

"It's a tough job," Zotynia says. "You're on your feet all day, and you're constantly working — as you should be."

The demands of a fast-moving workplace mean ARC has to train its clients how to fit in on the job. Disabled workers start in temporary positions until they build their stamina and learn the importance of showing up on time and working through their whole shifts.

The reward is that Lowe's pays workers \$12 an hour and offers regular raises.

"For my community, it's an extremely good wage," Zotynia says.

Keys to successful integration:

- Don't lower your standards.
- Be flexible.
- Work with a trainer.

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Working as a team

ARC has provided more than 50 disabled workers to the Pittston DC. Zotynia wanted to make sure disabled workers were part of the Lowe's team from the start, so she was certain to have 10 workers trained and ready when the DC opened in January 2009. If disabled workers had begun arriving after the workforce was established, Zotynia worried, they would have stood out as being different.

But, she reasons, "when you walk in the door together, you're all new."

Zotynia says any fears she had about the treatment of disabled workers quickly disappeared.

Lowe's pays bonuses based on team performance, and Zotynia says she has heard few complaints about disabled workers holding back overall performance. She praised Lowe's stringent hiring practices for bringing in workers who are more than willing to help out disabled coworkers.

And Zotynia says Lowe's managers have been more than willing to accommodate disabled workers. The company provided deaf workers with pagers that vibrate in the event of a fire alarm. And for one worker who's unable to drive a forklift, Lowe's provided a handcart.

Zotynia also praises Lowe's for responding gracefully to setbacks. For instance, one worker had trouble getting to the DC after a private cab company refused to accept the state-mandated rate for transporting a disabled person. Zotynia

"This is teaching us how to help people be successful."

called Lowe's to ask for leniency on the worker's behalf. Some employers would face one small problem like that and kill the whole program, Zotynia says.

Szilagyi and O'Connell offer the following tips for hiring disabled workers:

- Don't lower your standards. You should have the same expectations for job performance for disabled workers.

"In many cases, people will think, 'Oh, I'll have to lower my standards,'" O'Connell says. "The expectations should be the same."

- But be flexible. Expectations are the same, but disabled workers might need more elaborate instructions or more accommodating processes.

"It's not the what that's different; it's the how," O'Connell says. "If your expectation is to move 1,000 boxes, and the typical process is four steps, you might have to make it six steps."

- Find good partners. Szilagyi suggests working with nonprofit groups to help identify and train workers.

Make sure you and your partners have the same goal, namely putting disabled people in jobs where they can earn money and learn skills.

- Be open-minded. Szilagyi says he has learned not to limit hiring to certain types of jobs but to look at each applicant's strengths.

"You can't put limits on people," he says. "You can't say, 'It's only going to be these types of jobs.'"

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