

Lessons from Anderson: Walgreens' Autism-Employment Initiative

News reports continue to widely praise Walgreens' innovative Anderson, South Carolina, distribution center as a leader in employing adults with autism. But what are the details behind the program? How many people with autism are actually employed? How does their work performance compare to neurotypical employees?

Walgreens Manager Deb Russell is in charge of that program and she will tell you quite honestly - she does not know.

The reason, she explains, is that the program is not about tracking and labeling people with autism or other disabilities. It is about building systemic accommodations into the workplace culture so people with autism become just like any other employees.



She knows that nearly 40% of the employees at the Anderson facility have a disability, based on anonymous surveys of the staff. "But," she says, "There is a huge drop-off in the number of those people who will formally disclose their disability. About half do not." Because the supports and accommodations are so readily available at the facility, workers can use them without having to formally report their disability if they don't want to.

"I can tell you," Russell adds, "that many people with disabilities who do not need any accommodation still like to work here because of the accepting atmosphere toward disabilities." The freedom to be accepted as a co-worker, whether you have a disability or not, is powerfully motivating to these employees.

Although the project started out with a focus on autism employment, it soon moved beyond that.

"Autism is a model disability for us,"
Russell says.

She explains that by planning accommodations around the common needs of people on the autism spectrum, the program was able to expand easily to accommodate people with other disabilities. Autism was the template from which the program grew.

Russell is also quick to point out that no one is hired at Anderson BECAUSE they have autism or some other disability – they are hired because their abilities fit the job positions. The goal is to make autism irrelevant to the hiring process.



**The Staff of the Anderson, SC, Walgreens
Distribution Center**

And that is not true only at the Anderson facility. A year after that facility opened in 2007, a second Walgreens regional distribution center in Connecticut opened, with the same disability hiring practices, based on lessons learned at Anderson. That facility now has an even higher proportion of workers with disabilities than the Anderson plant. In the meantime, 14 of Walgreens 20 older regional distribution centers had also adopted the practices and supports developed at Anderson. In the years since, the remaining centers in the Walgreens Supply Chain Division have also implemented the program.

These programs do not have the same percentage of employees with disabilities as the newer facilities because, she explains, the existing facilities were already fully staffed before the program began, so workers with disabilities can only be hired as existing workers leave. Still, the rates are steadily rising in those centers.

At the core of this employment initiative is a toolkit of resources which is being shared through Walgreens' Supply Chain Division. The toolkit includes, among other things:

- Resources on disability etiquette
- Customized lessons for managers and supervisors on the features of different disabilities
- Job aids for common tasks in the facilities
- A social skills training curriculum for new hires with autism and related disorders, if needed

But the most exciting news at Walgreens is the planned expansion of the disability employment program to all 7,800 Walgreens retail stores across the country.

At this point, no date has been set for beginning that expansion beyond the fact that it will happen during 2012.

Russell and her staff are currently working on adapting the model and supports from the culture and tasks of the Supply Chain Division to the culture and tasks of the retail stores. Pilots are underway in Texas and New York and will begin in Chicago in early 2012.

Russell says the retail store managers are very interested in the project; "Our stores are hungry for sources of new talent and this is an untapped resource."

And there are further expansions underway for the future. For the last few years, Walgreens Distribution Centers have been "mentoring" managers from other large retail chains on how to implement similar autism and disability hiring initiatives in their own networks of facilities.

Russell is excited about the new directions for the program "We are on the verge of making autism recruitment institutional in our system. The goal was always to make it a self-sustaining success."

NOTE Deb Russell is President of the U.S. Business Leadership Network and Manager of Outreach and Employee Services for Walgreens. She will present the Opening Keynote address at the Autism Works National Conference in St. Louis, MO, March 6 & 7, 2011. James Emmett, who preceded Russell as manager of the Walgreens disability employment project, will also be presenting at the conference. Details on the conference are available at

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Autism-Works/136057253090452>

or at <http://dps.missouri.edu/Autism.html>.

The Autism Works national conference is presented by:



Integrated Behavioral Systems