

HOW WE LIVE

These are the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, studies show

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Published 5:00 a.m. ET Oct. 10, 2021 | Updated 3:05 p.m. ET Oct. 10, 2021

Kimberly Imhoff arrived at the Grover Cleveland Travel Center in Woodbridge understandably a bit nervous.

She was there for an in-person interview for a job and had worked hard to get to this point, filling out applications and practicing interview skills with her job coach.

Imhoff was ready.

But unknown to Imhoff, she was not there for an interview. The 26-year-old already had gotten the job — she was there for orientation.

"I got there and they said, 'You actually got the job,'" said Imhoff, who lives in the Port Reading section of Woodbridge. "I was so happy."

"The joy on her face — she got so excited," said Imhoff's job coach Christina Hughes.

Looking for a job is never easy, but those challenges multiply for the 1 in 4 Americans living with a disability, as reflected by the high rate of unemployment within this group.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, not even 1 in 5 people with a disability was employed in 2019, while in the same year, two-thirds of people without a disability had jobs.

When COVID-19 hit, things only got worse. According to the bureau, 17.9% of individuals with disabilities were employed in 2020. This is down from 19.3% in 2019.

'It's all about inclusivity'

This is National Disability Employment Awareness Month, which stresses employment opportunities and recognizes skills and talents of all individuals.

"It is all about inclusivity," said Hughes, an employment specialist with East Brunswick-based Easterseals NJ for two years and a job coach for five.

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Those with disabilities are happy to work, have a job to go to and to be included, Hughes said.

"I see them happy and doing something that they love," she said. "I had one individual — I was supporting him and he just came up to me and said 'I love my job' and walked away."

Easterseals NJ has created a guide to help employers hire more people with disabilities by raising awareness of the broad set of disabilities people have, including many that may not be readily apparent. It gives detailed guidance for recruiting, interviewing and onboarding workers who will bring talent and diversity to the workplace.

Hughes said employees with disabilities do not take their jobs for granted.

According to Easterseals NJ, studies show that companies that champion people with disabilities outperform others, driving profitability and shareholder returns. In some instances, revenues were 28% higher, net income 200% higher and profit margins 30% higher.

In addition to improved profitability, research shows organizations that employ people with disabilities have greater retention, reliability and punctuality, employee loyalty, inclusive work culture and enhanced company image, according to the organization.

Bringing joy to the job

Prior to her job as a service attendant at the Grover Cleveland Travel Center, which she started in June, Imhoff focused on job readiness skills. At the travel center, her job duties consist of stocking beverages, candy and snacks, organizing the shop and folding and placing T-shirts and sweatshirts on display.

She does a fantastic job keeping the store looking full and attractive, said Linda Keyser, district director for AppleGreen's New Jersey welcome centers.

"Kimberly is an extremely reliable and hardworking team member here at Grover and has contributed greatly to the success of the operation," said Keyser. "She is truly an asset here and we are very fortunate that she works with us."

But Imhoff brings more than her six hours a day, three days a week work schedule.

"Kimberly brings energy and life to the job," said Hughes.

"Speaking with her managers, I have been told she is a joy to work with," she added. "One manager in particular told me that whenever he sees her name on the schedule, he knows it is going to be a fun day."

"Companies of all types and sizes need to become informed and motivated to actively recruit people with disabilities," said Easterseals NJ CEO and President Brian Fitzgerald. "We're jumpstarting the process by showing the real benefits and breaking down the barriers. We know that employers across New Jersey have good intentions to hire people with disabilities, but too many still aren't doing it. We want to help turn their good intentions into action."

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To have a job makes Imhoff "feel wonderful."

"It is very important for anyone — not just people with disabilities — to have a job," she said. "But especially people with disabilities, I want them to know they can do anything if they put their mind to it. It is possible. My job is fulfilling. I am very grateful."

Disabilities employment celebration

A Disabilities Employment Celebration and job fair is scheduled from 4 to 7 p.m. Tuesday at Raritan Valley Community College's (RVCC) Conference Center in Branchburg.

The free event, presented by the Greater Raritan Workforce Development Board Disabilities Committee and RVCC, is open to employers who have positions they are looking to fill and community members looking for jobs and information about services.

Employers with immediate job openings scheduled to be in attendance include Amazon, Goodwill NYNJ, Matheny, NJ Cannabis Certified and Peapack-Gladstone Bank. In addition,

Remetronix and Wegmans will participate virtually.

Local agencies scheduled to be in attendance include Alternatives, The Arc of Somerset, Autism & Disability Employment National SME, the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Middle Earth, GoHunterdon, the Hunterdon Link, Progressive Center for Independent Living, Ridewise, the Somerset County Office on Aging & Disability Services and the StarThrower Group.

Attendees must wear face coverings while on site and maintain 6 feet of social distancing, and capacity room limits will be maintained.

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