

Social Enterprise: Creating Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities

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Summary

Jobs offer opportunities for social engagement, inclusion, and income generation that often elude a person with disabilities. Woods Resources is a network of exceptional human service providers that have joined forces and resources in achieving optimal outcomes for 3,600 children and adults with disabilities in New Jersey and

Pennsylvania. This is accomplished through a comprehensive continuum of support and services, including several social enterprises that are designed to provide integrated and competitive employment opportunities.

There is dignity in work. It contributes to an individual's self-worth and self-respect and offers a sense of purpose and accomplishment. According to the United States Department of Labor only 19.8 percent of people with disabilities who are over the age of 16 are employed, compared to 68.8 percent of those without disabilities.¹

Jobs offer opportunities for social engagement and inclusion that often elude a person with disabilities. Jobs also offer a chance to earn money, which facilitates greater independence. While changes in public policy such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) support and encourage the employment of individuals with disabilities, employment rates continue to lag.

There have been numerous studies of consumer attitudes about companies that hire people with disabilities, with the majority of consumers stating a preference to do business with companies that are socially responsible and provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities. In a report published in the Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation in 2006, 92 percent of respondents to a national survey of consumer attitudes

towards companies that hire people with disabilities felt more favorable toward those that hire individuals with disabilities. In fact, 82 percent specifically agreed they would prefer to give their business to a company that actively hires people with disabilities.²

There are numerous other reasons businesses should commit to hiring people with disabilities. They help to diversify the workplace, enhance employee morale and productivity, contribute to a reliable and enthusiastic workforce, and have access to on-the-job training supports provided at no cost to the company.

To address the void of employment opportunities for people with disabilities, a number of organizations have created affirmative enterprises that employ people with and without disabilities.

Woods Resources is a network of exceptional human service providers that have joined forces and resources in achieving optimal outcomes for 3,600 children and adults with disabilities in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Together, Woods Resources and its partners embrace innovation and teamwork to empower individuals to reach their highest potential. This is accomplished through a comprehensive continuum of support and services, including several social enterprises that are designed to provide integrated and competitive employment opportunities.

Woods Resources' oldest and largest affiliate, Woods Services, was founded over a century ago by visionary Mollie Woods, who gained international recognition for her groundbreaking work in helping children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In September 2016, Woods Services' Yellow Daffodil Flower and Gift Shop celebrated its 50th anniversary. The Yellow Daffodil operates two stores and a seasonal kiosk at a local shopping mall. It is getting ready to launch online ordering capability, which will create additional new jobs.

The Yellow Daffodil Flower and Gift Shop does what they wish other businesses would do; they divide larger jobs into smaller ones and match them to people's interests and talents. A young woman loves preparing the flowers when they arrive twice a week. Another individual loves merchandising and helps to display the gifts throughout the store. Someone else loves cleaning the vases. There are 20-25 separate jobs among the stores. Additionally, many of the items sold in the stores, such as artisan soaps, hand-poured scented soy candles, pet beds, and toys, are created by individuals with disabilities. This provides even more jobs that have varied skill requirements. The assembly of each item is broken into multiple steps that can be fulfilled by people with specific abilities. When needed, assistive devices are utilized, which facilitate the work for individuals challenged by physical disabilities.

Woods Services established another affirmative business

that makes and sells products at the Yellow Daffodil. Beechtree Products, whose motto is, "feel good products, made with love," hires individuals with acquired brain injuries to develop, produce and market a line of scented bath and body products. Using Yellow Daffodil's model of scaling large jobs into smaller tasks makes it possible for people to find their niche job in this unique business. Beechtree Products is also launching an online ordering website that will create more jobs and opportunities requiring employees with different skillsets.

Allies is another Woods Resources affiliate with affirmative businesses that employ people with disabilities. For more than a decade, Allies has been paving a path to independence, acceptance, and equality for individuals with special needs. Driven by the individual needs of the people it serves, innovation is the hallmark of the organization's services and underscores its every pursuit.

Allies' Greensleeves Boutiques are located in four communities and sell unique and re-purposed home décor, gently worn clothing and jewelry, baked goods, and much more. In addition to its storefronts, Allies offers day habilitation and prevocational training activities in space located in close proximity to the shops. This arrangement provides the opportunity for participants to cycle between work and other activities over the course of a day.

Another Woods Resources affiliate, Archway Programs,

offers a unique post-graduation skill-building music program that is also a business. Among its many services, Archway offers broad-based special education. Graduates of Archway's schools accepted into the summer Band of Colors music program receive vocational training in various aspects of music production and performance and learn to create adapted musical instruments.

Students schedule performances, set up and run sound systems, edit the website, and leave the summer program with well-honed skills in the music field. The adapted instruments that are made by the students are offered for sale on the organization's website: bandofcolors.org.

The return on investment of these affirmative enterprises cannot be measured in terms of profitability, as they operate at break-even when well-managed. However, the ROI in regard to the profound impact these employment opportunities have on the lives of the individuals who work in them is priceless. In several cases, start-up and expansion initiatives were funded with support from various philanthropic foundations. Ongoing operating expenses are paid with sales revenue. Necessary services and support to the employees are funded through fee-for-service reimbursement provided by various service funding agencies. The model is easily replicable and scalable, as demonstrated by the multiple sites operated by the Yellow Daffodil Flower and Gift Shop and Greensleeves Boutiques.

Transitional training is a critical component of vocational

preparation for young adults with disabilities. Archway works with regional employers to provide a wide range of jobs for many of their students. Students receive transition training while testing a variety of vocational opportunities for which they can earn a paycheck. They are accompanied by job coaches who help to train them and continue to prepare them for life post-graduation. Woods Services recently established a school dedicated solely to preparing students for work. Students attending the Brookwood School will rotate through various career exploration tracks that will culminate in internships, service learning, and paid employment. This program will help up to 70 students at any given time with disabilities make a seamless transition to integrated and competitive employment post-graduation. The success of the Brookwood School is dependent upon its ability to develop strong partnerships with area businesses to provide mentors and work experiences.

As increasing numbers of states jump on the "Employment First" bandwagon designed to increase opportunities for competitive and integrated employment for people with disabilities, we need to develop change solutions that encourage and facilitate partnerships among individuals with disabilities, service providers and businesses.

Author bios

Peter Shubiak is the Chief Operating Officer of Woods

Resources and is responsible for providing direction to and facilitating collaboration among the organization's five affiliate organizations. Peter is an accomplished senior healthcare and social services executive with extensive experience in managing comprehensive and integrated systems of care for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, behavioral health, and co-occurring disorders. He joined Woods in October 2011 and has extensive experience in operations, strategic planning, outcome performance, quality improvement, business development and staff development.

Cheryl Kauffman is Vice President of Communications and Public Relations and oversees advancement initiatives to engage stakeholders and individuals on behalf of Woods Resources and Woods Services. She joined Woods Services in 2002. She has broad experiences in building and sustaining brand awareness, strategic communications, and external relationships.

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