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OTHER VOICES

Intellectually disabled offer manufacturers workforce solution



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"Manufacturing in Connecticut is dead!" That's a phrase that was heard for many years in and around the Nutmeg State. The word was that manufacturers were moving their operations offshore. However, a recent report by the U.S. Census Bureau has demonstrated that manufacturing is again gaining a strong foothold, particularly in Hartford County. According to the report, Hartford County has a healthy 1,261 manufacturers employing a sizeable 57,000 workers.

Don Klepper-Smith, chief economist of DataCore Partners, calls manufacturing the "primary engine of economic growth" in Connecticut, but adds that the issue is how to keep that engine firing on all economic cylinders.

One growth strategy that some Connecticut manufacturers are using is hiring people with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD). People with even significant IDD can do complex and routine jobs leaving higher skilled and educated employees to focus on aspects of the job more fitting to their pay grade. This is a cost effective and strategic advantage that is catching on.

Organizations like Favarh — the Arc of the Farmington Valley — provide manufacturers with crews of four or five workers and a job coach to do complex yet routine assembly tasks like creating slat carriers at Trumpf, the large manufacturer of industrial lasers in Farmington; assembling intricate boxes at Rowley Spring and Stamping Corp. in Bristol; packaging electrical boxes and attaching gaskets to sheet-metal components at Legrand Wiremold in West Hartford; and packaging specialty "brushes" into cellophane bags at Microcare in New Britain.

Other manufacturers like Reliable Spring in Bristol outsource tasks to workers with IDD like inserting tiny screws into battery connectors used in the lights on miners' helmets around the globe.

The key is that all these tasks are both complex and routine, making them ideal for some IDD workers. Organizations that support workers with IDD work hard to match the right workers to each employer and teach the necessary skills, steps, and techniques; sometimes modifying the space or creating workarounds to allow for efficient work flow. Once taught, these workers become productive employees, often proving to be more reliable and more enthusiastic than their coworkers without disabilities.

Heather Gombos, vice president of business operations at Microcare, noted that her company just recently started using a crew of workers with IDD, but already she is seeing results.

"It has allowed us to better utilize our existing staff on more intricate work. It means we don't have to hire temp workers to do the more routine, repetitive work," she said. "Meanwhile, we ship our products all over the world so the things they touch here in New Britain will be used in manufacturing plants in places like China, Brazil and Germany. They are very enthusiastic when they come to work and that enthusiasm is infectious."

Bill Joyce, personnel and accounting manager at Rowley Spring, said the crew that works at his company, "lights up the room every day with their energy and their enthusiasm. We watch them grow, interact, learn and have fun. We are delighted with their influence on our organization and our culture. They are proud of their achievements and their contributions to our business. We all feel lucky to have them as part of the Rowley family."

Mike Kijak, plant manager of Legrand Wiremold, said the cost effectiveness of employing workers with IDD, coupled with their ability to master repetitive tasks, plus their sincere enthusiasm, makes the arrangement very worthwhile.

"Using our crew to do the repetitive aspects of our operation isn't just cost effective; it gets the job done in a way that boosts everyone's spirits," he said. "Every time you go into a store like Home Depot to buy something like a Wiremold electrical box, you're buying a product that was partially assembled and packaged by a worker with intellectual disabilities."

People with IDD work in manufacturing and a wide variety of other industries throughout Hartford County and many work independently and competitively. They are contributing employees, community volunteers, neighbors, and friends. They have so much to contribute and when given the chance, they are eradicating erroneous and antiquated stereotypes.

Hartford County manufacturers are clearly the powerhouse behind economic growth. Some of them, the smart ones, are also driving internal diversity in ways that boost efficiencies, improve morale, and increase productivity. Hiring people with intellectual and developmental disabilities isn't just good will, it's good business.

Stephen E. Morris is the executive director of Favarh — The Arc of the Farmington Valley— headquartered in Canton.