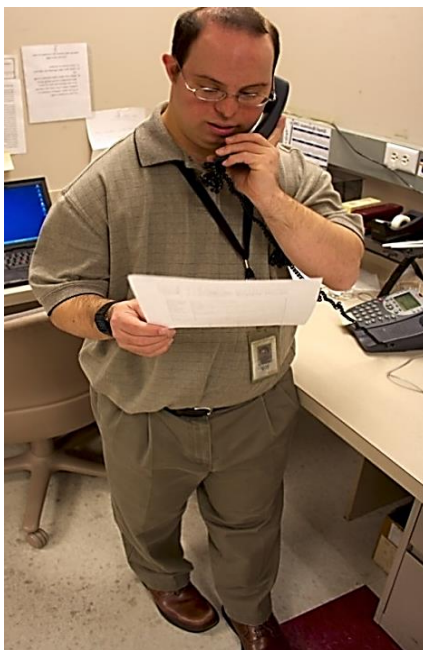


# Valued, Able & Ready to Work

## Employing Individuals with Down Syndrome



Since the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law in 1990, employing people with Down syndrome and other disabilities has been a realistic goal for all kinds of employers – corporations, small and local businesses and government agencies. However, many barriers to employment for individuals with Down syndrome still exist. Individuals with Down syndrome can and do make valuable employees and are ready to work, but often lack the opportunity. Furthermore, many employers have expressed interest in hiring employees with Down syndrome, but often lack the information and resources to support opportunities for employment.

This guide is intended to educate employers on hiring people with Down syndrome by highlighting benefits, suggesting tips for success, identifying some challenges, sharing success stories and providing resources.

### **Determining an Employee & Employer Match**

There are various types and places of employment, each with numerous tasks to be performed and skills required to perform them. The key to successful employment is to match individuals with Down syndrome with needed skills, tasks and workplace culture – just like any other employment match. Like in any population, job seekers with Down syndrome have a range of abilities and personalities. People with Down syndrome are, in general, known to be dependable, structured, loyal, enthusiastic, and most of the time, social and interactive. It has been reported time and time again that individuals with Down syndrome generate “inspiration” and “spark” in the workplace.

# Getting Started & Discovering the Best Fit



## Internships

Individuals with or without disabilities are encouraged to seek internship opportunities to explore and discover how and where they can be most successful. Each state has programs that support internships for adults with disabilities starting in high school and continuing in post-secondary and vocational education.

## Assessment

Before placing an individual with Down syndrome in a job environment, it may be helpful to have an assessment period to observe strengths and weaknesses. This allows the employer to tailor training before the employee officially starts the job.

## Individualized Training and Mentoring

Getting to know the needs of the employee with Down syndrome is essential. Like many employees, people with Down syndrome succeed in a friendly environment where they are cared about as a person. People with Down syndrome typically enjoy routine and structure, and will thrive working with a mentor who has good coaching skills.



# Tips for Success When Working with Individuals with Down Syndrome

## Set Goals

An employee with Down syndrome will often work best when given specific short-term goals. People with Down syndrome tend to think in “concrete” rather than “abstract” terms, so it may be useful to write out goals clearly. It is important to keep in mind that long-term goals become easier to attain when broken into short-term goals. It is also helpful to give the employee specific deadlines to meet each goal. These deadlines may need to be adjusted from time to time, but will help an employee to pace him- or herself.



## **Provide a Routine**

Employees with Down syndrome tend to be comfortable with the structure of routine. This is best manifested in the workplace with an organized, descriptive schedule, and involves setting deadlines, understanding hours of operation, breaks, meeting times and holidays. Because routine is so beneficial, an employee with Down syndrome may get frustrated when there is a change in routine. If possible, it is best to give the employee notice of upcoming change in routine to give him or her time to adjust expectations.



## **Meet Regularly**

Having regular meetings with the direct supervisor can help an employee with Down syndrome internalize and become better familiarized with expected tasks. These meetings could be daily, but should take place at least every other day to be most effective and provide an opportunity to ask and answer questions.

## **Encourage Inclusion**

Participation in staff events and after-work activities (i.e., athletic events, volunteer activities, and departmental lunches or staff meetings) help integrate employees with Down syndrome within the workplace culture. Including employees with Down syndrome validates their standing within the organization, while building mutual respect and camaraderie among employees creates a healthy workplace culture for all. The more comfortable all employees are with each other in the workplace, the harder and more enthusiastically they will work. Including employees with Down syndrome in work events provides an overall positive experience, boosting workplace morale and fostering friendships.

## **Be Flexible**

Although it may be challenging at times, the direct supervisor should keep in mind that it may take extra time to guide and assist employees with Down syndrome. However, it is just as important that employees with Down syndrome are allowed independence. Too little assistance and the employee may lose focus; too much and they may become dependent. The key is to find the correct balance so that the working relationship is beneficial for both parties, and ultimately, for the organization. It is always good to ask if extra assistance is needed with a task instead of making assumptions and jumping in to help. It may simply be taking the employee with Down syndrome longer to process directions or make a plan to get the work done.



## **Keep an Open Mind**

People with Down syndrome tend to be social but may find it difficult to fully articulate their viewpoints. With patience, focused listening and time, employees with Down syndrome may surprise you with their unique insight. A willingness to understand their perspectives and the way they approach problems will bring a richer, more stimulating work environment for everyone. Sometimes people with Down syndrome have speech problems or other challenges expressing themselves. Give individuals with Down syndrome more time to respond to questions, and if you do not understand the communication, ask for the response to be repeated.



## **Educate Your Staff**

You or other people in your workplace may not have ever known or worked with anyone who has Down syndrome or another disability, and that's OK. An employee with Down syndrome may or may not be comfortable talking about having Down syndrome, but you could ask if he or she would like to talk about it as part of an introduction. Consider sharing information about Down syndrome with colleagues, keeping in

mind that they may have questions. There are plenty of resources to get up-to-date, accurate information. *Facts About Down Syndrome, Myths & Truths*, and a *Preferred Language Guide* can be accessed and printed from [www.ndss.org](http://www.ndss.org). Educating a staff makes for better understanding and a better workplace.

# Expectations of Employees with Down Syndrome

Any employer should expect the best from any employee – this should be no different for an employee with Down syndrome. Employees with Down syndrome do not want pity or to serve as a token, but rather for the employer to have practical expectations.

To maintain expectations for employees with Down syndrome:

- *Be patient*
- *Learn individual strengths and weaknesses, and build upon them*
- *Most of all, treat individuals with Down syndrome with the same respect as any other employee*

Employees with Down syndrome demonstrate their abilities when opportunities are offered. When given the chance, employed individuals with Down syndrome have shown that, like anyone else, they are essential team members and contribute far more than many expect.

## Ready to Work: Experiences of Employees with Down Syndrome

I am a Small Business Owner, a Valued Employee and, Most Importantly, a Tax Payer!

By Katy Hull, Longview, TX



My name is Katy Hull, and I am a small business owner, a valued employee and most importantly, a tax payer. When I was in high school, I decided that I wanted to go to college, and with the help of my transition team, this became real to me. I worked in the college library and had a second job working at a local restaurant.

After college, I worked in an office filing, copying, shredding and putting packets together. I was only working part time and needed to make more money. I became part of pilot program that helped me create my dream business which is called SlushFun, a frozen drink machine rental business.

I have also been able to expand my business through my Plan to Achieve Self Support (PASS) through the Social Security office. I have worked for United Cerebral Palsy as an AmeriCorps Vista Volunteer, and I currently work for the Arc of Gregg County answering the phone, putting together mailers and creating community support by being a member of local service clubs. I continue to receive home and community based services, which have supported me to achieve my employment position.

# My 20 Years of Competitive Employment

By David Egan, Vienna, VA



My journey to employment took many years to prepare and I had many people helping me. I have learned it takes a team who cares. Preparation for work and inclusion starts at home. In my family, I was taught that work is part of life. I was not excused from chores because of my disability. In high school, I learned about work through an internship at the Wild Life Federation where I was able to gain vocational skills at a training center following high school graduation. In 1996, while still in high school, I had an internship at Booz Allen Hamilton through the Marriott Foundation's Bridges from School to Work® and two years later, I was offered a staff position as a clerk in the Booz Allen Hamilton Distribution Center. I worked there for almost 20 years until the company outsourced these services to CBRE, my current employer. I had to reapply for my job, just like my peers, before being rehired.

My first supervisor took it upon herself to teach me everything there was to know about being a clerk in the Distribution Center, and she believed in me. The Fairfax County Public School sent a job coach to help me, but my supervisor preferred to be the coach herself. She taught me how to fill out my timesheet and establish a routine for the day. I was treated like all employees at work and they had expectations for a job done well. I went to compulsory training and participated in corporate events. The company cared about my professional and personal development. I received benefits, an annual 360-degree assessment and paid vacation and sick time. I started my career by getting compensated with minimum wage, and continued to receive wage increases and awards based on achieving my performance goals. I felt like I was part of the team and in the process made many friends.

I, and many others like me, have demonstrated that we can contribute and be successful in the competitive workplace. I am thankful and proud of having a job, and for me, it is more than a paycheck. It gives me dignity. Hiring people with Down syndrome is a good business decision as well as a social responsibility.

# Further Resources

## **Association of Persons Supporting Employment (APSE)**

[www.apse.org](http://www.apse.org)

Focuses on integrated employment and career advancement opportunities for individuals with disabilities

## **Job Accommodation Network (JAN)**

[www.jan.wvu.edu](http://www.jan.wvu.edu)

A source of free, expert and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues

## **Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress: Your Next Star**

<http://yournextstar.com/faq/information-for-employers>

This list of resources for employers provides excellent information for business owners and those hiring

## **National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability/Youth**

[www.ncwd-youth.info](http://www.ncwd-youth.info)

Assists state and local workforce development systems to better serve all youth, including youth with disabilities

## **National Down Syndrome Society – Helpline**

800-221-4602 / [info@ndss.org](mailto:info@ndss.org)

Through our toll-free helpline and email service, NDSS receives more than 10,000 requests a year for information on Down syndrome

## **National Down Syndrome Society: Employment & Volunteer Work**

<http://www.ndss.org/Resources/Transition-and-Beyond/Employment-Volunteer-Work/>

Provides information and resources on types of employment

## **Recruiting, Hiring, Retaining, and Promoting People with Disabilities—A Resource Guide for Employers**

[https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/employing\\_people\\_with\\_disabilities\\_toolkit\\_february\\_3\\_2015\\_v4.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/employing_people_with_disabilities_toolkit_february_3_2015_v4.pdf)

Developed by a federal cross-agency effort working to increase equal employment opportunities and financial independence for individuals with disabilities

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