

National Down Syndrome Congress

The Scoop: The Big Six for Employing People with Disabilities By Jeff Novorr, Vice President of Hospitality Services, University of Kansas Health System

Here's the scoop... Walt Disney once famously said, "It all started with a Mouse." For me, it all started with a scoop (of ice cream). You read that right – my exposure to disability employment began with a scoop – a Golden Scoop to be exact. In 2021, after reading an article in the local media, I visited The Golden Scoop, a then-new, not-for-profit ice cream shop in Overland Park, Kansas. You see, they mostly employ people with disabilities, and according to the article I read, they were no longer accepting applications for employment because they had a waiting list for open positions. At the same time, amid the pandemic, my departments at The University of Kansas Health System were struggling with more than 100 open positions we could not fill. What was I missing? Turns out a lot.

I've worked in healthcare for nearly 30 years, and I've learned a lot throughout my career. One of the things that I thought I knew, especially working in healthcare, was what is a disability. I thought I could recognize someone who had a disability, and if I'm being honest, had never consciously thought about employing someone with a disability. It's been a bit more than two years since that first scoop, so what have I learned? Turns out a lot.



Among the many things that I've learned is that people don't have a disability, they are living with a disability, and how someone chooses to live their life defines who they are. Nearly 25% of people are born with a disability, so the likelihood that you are already employing someone living with a disability is pretty good. I also learned that individuals living with disabilities such as Down syndrome or Autism make great employees. Why? A positive attitude, a real desire to contribute, consistent and reliable attendance, very low turnover. Shall I continue?

I'm part of a health system that employs more than 17,000 people, and we hire and onboard new employees every week. Over the course of the last year and a half, we've learned a lot about disability employment. Experience brings failure, and failure brings improvement. As a result, we are working to make The University of Kansas Health System a better employer for a more diverse group of people. While everything we've learned is important, let me share my "big 6" that I believe are most impactful to employing people living with some types of disability...

1) The interview process is different. It's okay – in fact, expected, that a parent or job coach is going to be part of that process. When I am interviewing a candidate for a job, a question I frequently ask is "What is your superpower?" I like this question because the response focuses on one's abilities, not their disabilities. The fact of the matter is that we all have things we cannot do, and when that becomes our focus, the opportunities become much less.

2) Recruitment is different. When you begin to hire individuals living with disabilities, word tends to spread in the community. Quickly.

3) The job description is different. Once you know your new employee's superpower, embrace their abilities, and make sure your expectations align with what the individual can reasonably manage. Shifts and hours may have to flex a bit because transportation is often an issue. Remember, you still have a business to run, so any adjustments must work for everyone, but showing just a bit of flexibility can go a long way.

4) Onboarding and orientation are different. Many organizations have day-long orientation programs, and someone living with a disability is less likely to be successful in that setting. Onboarding and orientation likely must be done in small blocks of time, and often in a one-to-one setting. A parent or job coach is frequently present and part of this process.

5) Training is different. We all learn at a different pace, and training for someone living with a disability may take longer than other employees. Work may need to be explained or demonstrated in a different way. Sometimes seeing work through a different lens makes the process better for everyone!

6) Coaching and discipline are different. All employees must be treated equally, and company policies must be applied uniformly across the board. Living with a disability does not exempt one from following the rules, coming to work on time, and behaving in a professional manner. What may be different is how you explain the policies and how you have those difficult conversations.

The opportunity to know and work with a diverse group of individuals is a privilege that I don't take for granted. I and my team have learned a lot, but we still have a long way to go and are looking forward to the day when we are able to hire more individuals living with the types of disabilities that we treat every day as a healthcare provider. As we like to say at The University of Kansas Health System, we are proud, but never satisfied.

You know what else I learned? I love ice cream. OK – maybe I already knew that. And that's the scoop.

Jeff Novorr is Vice President of Hospitality Services at The University of Kansas Health System.



The National Down Syndrome Congress (NDSC) is the country's oldest national organization for people with Down syndrome, their families, and the professionals who work with them. We provide information, advocacy and support concerning all aspects of life for individuals with Down syndrome, and work to create a national climate in which all people will recognize and embrace the value and dignity of people with Down syndrome.