

More Alike than Different:

Individuals with Down syndrome are citizens that matter in the workforce

By David Egan

As we celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) this October, it is critical that we recognize the **value that individuals with Down syndrome bring to the workplace. We contribute and have abilities in spite of our challenges. Employers miss a great opportunity when they ignore us and do not include us in the workplace.**

Reflecting on my employment journey, I have been exceptionally fortunate and am immensely proud of my fulfilling path in competitive employment. I am so grateful to the people who have supported me along the way and wish to pay it forward. Today, my passion lies in empowering others with disabilities by showcasing that individuals with Down syndrome, like myself, are not only capable but also valuable assets in the workforce.

My employment journey began with a summer internship at Booz Allen Hamilton distribution center after graduating from high school. Following the completion of my internship, I was offered a full-time job with the company and received full benefits like all other employees, which was a big deal in 1998! Back then, there were not many companies that hired and paid individuals with disabilities a competitive salary. Not only that, they also cared about me as an employee, and the causes that matter to me like Special Olympics and the Down syndrome community. My employer had high expectations and acknowledged my contributions in the workplace and in the community, including my honest and strong work ethic. This first work experience served as the catalyst for my 25-year competitive employment journey and advocacy career.

Employment gave me more than a job, I have become an author and advocate. My story is still uncommon. While we have made some progress, more must be done to help people with disabilities to obtain competitive jobs. Low expectations and assumptions about what we are capable of are persistent barriers that stand in the way of opportunity and workplace inclusion.

I stand as living proof that the decision to hire individuals with Down syndrome yields positive results – and this has even been supported by research. Studies have shown that individuals with Down syndrome

and disabilities are reliable, consistent, and loyal employees. “Hiring individuals with disabilities is a good business decision and a social responsibility” as I said to Congressional members when I testified in 2011 at the Senate Committee on Health Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP). More still needs to be done to advocate for employment opportunities, especially since the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is nearly twice that of people without disabilities.

Many people with differing abilities want to work, but no one can get a job simply by wishing for it. Opportunities must exist, but they won’t unless employers see the value of hiring us and make an intentional effort to raise their expectations of what we can accomplish. Work is about productivity and making money, but it is also about human interactions and learning to work as a team. People with disabilities help uncover human values to improve the work environment and company culture. Employers must also look at the added benefits that we bring to the workplace. Managers and colleagues who work with us become better at their job by learning how to effectively explain things in simpler terms, which benefits everyone.

I am proud to say that all of my employers, starting with Booz Allen Hamilton, then CBRE, the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation and Source America recognized my ability and included me fully. In fact, I was **“One of Them and Not One Among Them.”** While some progress has been made in recent years to hire people with disabilities, there is more work that must be done. During this NDEAM, I ask all employers to open their doors to individuals with intellectual disabilities and see the potential that we bring to the workforce.

Hire us and include us in your environment. You will not regret it!

Bio: David Egan is a leader and an eager advocate who promotes the causes of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. He worked for 25 years in various competitive employment positions as a clerk with Booz Allen Hamilton and then with CBRE and lately as a Community Relations Coordinator at Source America. He is the first person with Down syndrome to serve as a Joseph P Kennedy Jr. Public Policy Fellow on Capitol Hill. As a Special Olympics athlete and Sargent Shriver International Global Messenger, he traveled extensively and spoke to diverse audiences. He is also the author of “More Alike Than Different: My Life with Down Syndrome. www.davideganadvocacy.com