

National Disability Employment Awareness Month: Seeing Endless Possibilities

By Alexandra Hayes

Everyone deserves the chance to achieve their dreams in life, including people with disabilities. As an adult with Down Syndrome, one of my biggest dreams is to work and my friends like me feel the same. No matter what that looks like for each person, it should be a part of our world. People with disabilities are here for a reason and we teach the world important lessons every day. If people who learn differently believe in themselves, why wouldn't others? As Sean Aiken, the creator of the One Week Job Project once said, "The belief that you can have a meaningful career is the first step to finding one."

National Disability Employment Awareness Month makes people stop and think about employing people with disabilities. It is a suitable time to highlight what employers are missing if they are not considering people with all kinds of abilities. To begin, when you hire a person who learns differently, you show the world how valuable and capable people are. Many people, including myself, are changing the way the world views them by going to post high programs and even specialized college programs so they can get jobs that require more job skills instead of entry level jobs. Today many differently abled people have a job that partners with schools and colleges because those places welcome diverse types of people. Because people with disabilities are included in these programs, the world sees them more often and is amazed by their abilities. With more programs and chances, the world is learning how critical it is to make use of the skills that people with disabilities have. There are so many positive gains when people consider hiring a person with special needs.

Next, being employed builds confidence. Having a safe space where you like the work is empowering. Being a part of the hustle and bustle of work makes a person feel strong and accepted. Working also pushes people with disabilities to want to take on the world and help their company reach their goals. Having a confident employee is important. People who feel secure work hard. It is a "win win" for any company to employ people who learn differently.

Another positive aspect of employing disabled people is the way it strengthens social emotional wellness for the employee and the whole workplace. Being a part of something bigger than oneself is healthy and employment gives that to a person with a disability. It is ok if an employee needs some guidance, especially if someone has faced challenges that make working hard. This sometimes creates special connections between employers and employees. Also, the power of making friends at work makes the day seem bearable; and those who give support feel good too. Based on my experience at work, my happiness is contagious. Before working with me, many people only saw people with Down syndrome from a distance. When people see how happy I am, they want to be a part of that joy. My success at work grows more happiness and positivity. This is another "win win" situation.

Most importantly, employing people with disabilities promotes financial independence. It is clear to see the benefits of employment when that person's goals are met, and they can live the

adult life they have pictured for themselves. Financial security matters because it stabilizes the path for the future so that the person with a unique learning style can find their way in life without relying on others. Because I work, I am powerful. I can buy dinner for myself and my sister. I can treat my brother and his wife to ice cream whenever I want. I am confident about budget conversations and overseeing my own finances. Having access to good jobs for ALL, not just entry level jobs, is important. Also, believing in the abilities of all kinds of people is important to our world. The more independent people are the better we ALL feel. If people could see the world the way adults with disabilities do, the possibilities are endless.

Overall, NDEAM means thinking differently. People might not realize that I have dreams just like anyone else. I am a writer, and I love to read books based on social emotional wellness, confidence, and cognitive behavior therapy. I love to learn about chakras, healing crystals and I want to use my knowledge to help others with special needs and give advice to middle school age children up to young adults who may be going through something in life. While I am working and going to college, I want to start a blog on the topic of Health and Wellness. I hope people will read my blog, ask me questions or request quizzes or calming pictures. If the world can shift its thinking away from picturing people like me in entry level jobs and encourage someone like me to shoot for my goals, it could be amazing for everyone. I mean come on; I have already done so much more than anyone ever thought possible, and I am just 26 years old.