

Makes good business sense to hire those with disabilities

By Michelle Scott Hood

In California, nine out of 10 adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities are currently unemployed, despite the state's overall unemployment rate of 6 percent. These adults may have autism, Down syndrome or cerebral palsy and therefore are often overlooked when applying for jobs. However, they are perfectly capable, valuable and reliable employees.

The good news is that programs exist to help organizations hire people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. HireAble is a local, collaborative, employer-focused campaign between three nonprofit human service agencies: Contra Costa ARC, Futures Explored and East Bay Innovations. Its goal is to raise employment rates for people with IDD.

At ICA Fund Good Jobs, we work with East Bay Innovations

to find an intern to round out our services team. Alva Gardner, who has cerebral palsy, was the candidate referred to us by EBI. Gardner is now our Entrepreneur Services Fellow and part of the Entrepreneur Services team. Her day-to-day work includes attending meetings, assisting with administrative work, helping develop work plans and creating and maintaining spreadsheets. Gardner is a talented and respected member of the ICA team who adds value to our office by producing high-quality work every day.

She is the perfect fit — smart, ambitious, thorough and has the drive of an entrepreneur. Before Gardner started, EBI provided a support person who helped us evaluate our office to accommodate Gardner's wheelchair needs. Then, during Gardner's first few weeks, EBI provided a job coach

who helped with acclimation to the office.

Just as we saw with Gardner, HireAble offers employers a pool of dedicated and qualified candidates to meet companies' needs. These candidates are hardworking professionals who aspire to have a job and become a valuable member of your team. HireAble has experience connecting employers to this underutilized workforce and then providing support and training for a seamless transition.

ICA Fund Good Jobs works with local small business entrepreneurs to help create accessible good jobs that lead to equitable communities for all. In 2016, ICA Fund Good Jobs served more than 200 companies in the Bay Area and has been working with thousands of dynamic small businesses since 1996.

Part of my role at ICA Fund Good Jobs is to steward rela-

tionships between workforce partners and companies with job openings. When I talk to businesses about making their workplaces more diverse and inclusive, I explain that there are many reasons they should consider hiring a person with IDD.

First and foremost, an employee with IDD had to overcome challenges and work much harder to become part of the workforce. They have lots experience tackling challenges.

Second, people with disabilities are reliable, productive, creative and innovative performers. These are the qualities Gardner brings to our team at ICA Fund Good Jobs.

Finally, given an option, I would always choose to make my workplace diverse. Not only should organizations strive to be inclusive and forward-thinking, but studies show that the more diverse a work environ-

ment, the happier their employees are.

So what's stopping businesses from engaging with this untapped talent? Some argue it's purely logistics — organizations fear that they don't have the proper facilities or equipment to accommodate people with IDD. Others fear the impact on current employees.

I say the proof is entirely otherwise. Bay Area businesses can set an example of inclusive, diverse and productive workplaces. It starts with programs like HireAble and it thrives with companies who are forward thinking and want the best not only for society, but for their company. I encourage our Bay Area businesses to explore hiring people with IDD.

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