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Bringing different abilities to the workplace

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It was the late 1990s, and Peterborough resident Michael B. Cole, now 34, was at an interview for a customer service representative's job at the Yankee Book Peddler in Contoocook. Cole, who's had cerebral palsy since birth, could tell his wheelchair was making his interviewer nervous — nervous because the desks in the office were too low to accommodate him, and the restrooms weren't equipped to handle his needs.

The interviewer thought it might cost the company a lot of money to make the workplace workable for Cole, he said.

But Cole knew better. He explained that many of these obstacles could be overcome cheaply.

The short-desk problem could be solved by placing blocks of wood under its legs, for example. And grab-bars purchased from a hardware store could fix any problems with the Yankee Book Peddler's bathroom, he said.

"An ordinary trackball mouse would make my computer accessible to me," said Cole, whose condition affects the movement of his limbs.

"By working with the interviewer I put her fears at ease, which enabled her to focus more on my abilities as a potential employee," he said.

Cole was hired for the Book Peddler job, which was only supposed to last for two or three months. But he ended up staying for about six months before he took another job, in 1998, at the Crotched Mountain Rehabilitation Center in Greenfield, where he has worked since.

Cole's story is an example of an individual overcoming the obstacles that often prevent people with disabilities from finding work in the Monadnock Region, although efforts are under way at the state and local level to increase employment of the disabled.

A resource to be tapped

In February, Cole visited Concord and told the story of his Yankee Book Peddler interview as part of his testimony before the Insurance and Banks Committee of the N.H. Senate. The committee was considering a bill — Senate Bill 273 — which makes it illegal for an employer to fail to make a reasonable accommodation for an employee with a disability.

This bill, which eventually passed and was signed into law by Gov. John H. Lynch last week, only applies if the employee is basically qualified to do the job, and if accommodating the employee wouldn't "pose an undue hardship" for the employer.



Michael B. Cole of Peterborough, who has cerebral palsy, has worked in Web design at Crotched Mountain Rehabilitation Center in Greenfield for the past eight years.
STEVE HOOPER / Sentinel Staff

Cole sees the relationship between employers and employees with disabilities as a two-way street, he said. Employers have a responsibility to try to find ways to make hiring a disabled person feasible, he said, but employees also have a responsibility to work with their employers toward the same goal.

Last month, the N.H. Department of Health and Human Services formed a task force to examine ways to expand work opportunities for people with disabilities. The chairman of that committee is John Wallace, the department's associate commissioner.

Today, only about 45 percent of the people with disabilities who receive support from the N.H. Bureau of Developmental Services are employed, according to a press release. The task force's goal is to bring it up to 70 percent by next summer, the press release stated.

People with disabilities are "one of the most underemployed segments of society," said Heather A. Kemper, a project assistant for the Monadnock Center for Successful Transitions.

The center, part of Monadnock Development Services in Keene, focuses on assisting people — especially people with disabilities — in making the transition from youth into adulthood.

For someone who's disabled and spends their days in a special education program funded by a public school district, the 21st birthday is a major milestone, as that's the day when a person is no longer entitled to public education.

The center's project coordinator, Sheila Mahon, and another employee of Monadnock Developmental Services, Christopher Coates, plan to tour the state this month, visiting Rotary Clubs and events to promote employment for people with disabilities, Kemper said.

Looking for good people

Crotched Mountain Rehabilitation Center, a nonprofit organization that supports people with disabilities, is one of the Monadnock Region's largest employers, with roughly 900 employees, of which about 5 percent — between 40 and 50 workers — have disabilities, including hearing or speech impairment.

"Most people with disabilities end up working in disability communities, rehab centers," said Cole, the Web designer. For one thing, the buildings are highly accessible, he said, and for another, it's easier to fit in.

Crotched Mountain also runs a school for about 125 students with disabilities in kindergarten through grade 12.

Lempster resident George W. Peterson is the school's vocational evaluator, which means he helps the older students figure out which jobs will suit their interests and abilities. Then he and other staff try to coordinate with local businesses to find volunteer or part-time work for those students.

Ultimately, the goal is for those students to transition into a paid, competitive job, he said. The retail and hospitality industries are typically receptive to hiring employees with disabilities, as are housekeeping services, nursing homes and recycling centers, Peterson said.

But each student has his own specific interests that point to a particular job, he said.

For example, 11 years ago the school placed a student at Frederick's Pastries in Amherst. Since then, some have asked Peterson why nobody has followed in that student's footsteps. The reason, he said, is that nobody with that student's profile has sought a job since then, he said.

Peterson meets with prospective employers several times throughout the year, in part to sell the concept of hiring a person with disabilities. The key, he said, is preparation: If he can document that an employee has certain skills, such as following instructions and working independently, then he can usually get past reticence about hiring, he said.

When approached by Peterson, some employers say they aren't hiring, or otherwise indicate that they aren't interested, he said. But sometimes Peterson hears the magic words: We're always looking for good people.

When he hears that, Peterson knows he can make the sale, because he knows the potential employee well enough to know the employee can do the job, he said.

John Fields is a big hit

One company that has already discovered the benefits of hiring a person with disabilities is Innerpac Inc, a Chicago-based manufacturer of packaging materials. Innerpac employs about 30 people at a plant at 1 Partition Place in Keene, including John Fields, who's had a developmental disability since he was born about 40 years ago.

Innerpac General Manager Edward Loredo met Fields in 1997, when the Keene plant was still under construction and Loredo was using offices at Monadnock Community Services in Keene to interview potential employees. Monadnock Community Services introduced Loredo to Fields.

Loredo could tell that Fields had a cognitive disability, he said, but he could also tell that Fields was upbeat, honest and eager, ready to answer any question put to him.

Nevertheless, Loredo was reluctant to hire him at first, concerned he might not have a job suitable for Fields, he said.

But he did hire Fields, and it turned out to be a big success story. Fields has worked there ever since, making a competitive salary and full benefits.

After starting out as a janitor, Fields was eventually given responsibility for operating a bailing machine that disposes of scrap. It's a physically challenging job that Fields does with almost no special accommodations, Loredo said.

When Fields' supervisors need to discuss an issue about Fields' work, they discuss it with him directly, Loredo said.

"He has his own position that everyone respects," Loredo said.

Innerpac received one of four awards the Family Council, Monadnock Developmental Services and the Monadnock Center for Successful Transitions handed out in April to employers of people with disabilities in the Monadnock Region.

The other winners were WV Engineering Associates of Keene, a firm that designed a job to fit an autistic worker's specific computer skills; the city of Keene Parks and Recreation Department, which employed seven people with disabilities in April; and Melissa Dutile, a supervisor at the Hannaford's in Keene, who hired a disabled young man.