

Disability pride lasts more than just one month: Our society is better when everyone has a place in the workplace

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On his first day of work at Athleta, the luxury athletic boutique in the Flatiron district, a new maintenance employee, Jaden, noticed something possibly amiss on display and asked the store manager a question: Is that shirt strap supposed to rest in a notch on the hanger?

Jaden is one of the hundreds of New Yorkers with autism and other developmental disabilities who receive vital support in employment from Job Path, the New York City nonprofit I am proud to lead as CEO.

Jaden was right about the hanger, and his eye for detail has proved him to be an incredible asset. Since he was hired in 2022, his duties have expanded from maintenance and cleaning to restocking and display.

I think about Jaden and so many others, especially last month as we celebrated Disability Pride Month marking the July 26, 1990 signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The ADA was a landmark in civil rights activism, providing standards of access for public places; ensuring equal opportunities in health care, social services, telecommunications and transportation; and banning employment discrimination.

What we see every day at Job Path are the many companies large and small in every possible field that go beyond preventing discrimination against people with disabilities. These employers embrace people with disabilities not just because it's the right (and legal) thing to do but because it's also a good business decision.

Athleta's General Manager Kelly McLaughlin told us that "Jaden has been an absolute pleasure to work with. He is always on time and takes pride in his work. He was quick to learn and does a great job keeping everything neat and organized. He is willing to take on a challenge and learn something new."

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' most recent data, people with disabilities have made huge gains in the post-pandemic labor market. As of June, the number of employed people with disabilities has risen by about 175,000 to 7.6 million — the highest it has ever been since the BLS started tracking that data 15 years ago.

These types of gains can be harder to achieve for people with autism and other developmental disabilities, who generally have an employment rate of about 20%. At Job Path, we've been working for more than four decades to address this, helping New Yorkers with autism and other developmental disabilities find jobs and succeed in them, while earning at least minimum wage. Through the dedication of employment counselors and staff, about 85% of people who come to Job Path find meaningful employment.

How do we attain that level of success? We use what's called a customized employment approach, a method endorsed by the U.S. Department of Labor. We look to the employer and their needs and find a match with a participant and their strengths. Our coaches prepare job seekers prior to an interview and support them on site, if needed, at no cost to the employer for as long or often as necessary.

This approach is what brought Randy, who has a knack for computers, to a nonprofit where he scans documents, freeing up other staff. It connected Christian, a social butterfly, to a children's museum where he's praised as one of the hardest workers on staff. Job Path participants work in coffee shops, supermarkets, restaurants, offices, and retail stores.

As we reflect on Disability Pride Month, I think about what I heard from Jaden in his first weeks on the job. He was excited both when he was hired and later when his role was expanded.

"They said they needed more help, so I'm working more," he said.

Jaden told us that he likes his job because he likes learning new things and enjoys making things in the store neat and tidy. He also likes to be able to treat his family with little things from his paycheck — his first in his life.

At a time when the words "labor shortage" are still reverberating, I urge all employers to look at ways to hire people with disabilities. You'd be in good company; our employer partners range from Fortune 500 giants to local mom-and-pop establishments.

Hiring people with disabilities means that employers get dedicated, motivated employees. Participants get the dignity of work and a role in the community. And our society as a whole is better when everyone has a place in the workplace.

That's something we can all be proud of all year long.

Teichman is the CEO of Job Path, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in the Garment District that serves New Yorkers with autism and other developmental disabilities.

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