

Reasonable Accommodation Case Study - Safeway - Northwest Divisional

Targeted Community Outreach

Safeway Stores were started by M. B. Scaggs in 1915. By 1926, 428 stores were developed across 10 states and today the company has 1,700 in both the United States and Canada. The company has a strong altruistic spirit and in 2002 Safeway donated \$100 million in cash/merchandise value to needy community partners. Since 1985, \$65 million was donated to the needs of those individuals with disabilities.

The Northwest Divisional Office, located in Bellevue, Washington provides for the diverse needs of 23,000 employees across 197 stores in Washington, Alaska, Montana and Idaho. It is the third largest employer in the state of Washington, the largest in Alaska, and ranks in the top 10 in Montana. It is also one of the largest union involved company in the country, with union members being represented in all departments. The company also runs a large distribution center in order to route grocery goods to their stores.

Personnel Interviewed

Cherie Myers, Northwest Division, Director of Public Relations/Government Affairs; Christine Miller, Northwest Division, Employment Specialist; Steve Mooers, Store Manager, Safeway, Tacoma; and Scott Wahl, Store Manager, Safeway, Bellevue Kingsgate

Innovative Disability Outreach Activity

In reviewing progress the company has made in terms of effective hiring of individuals with disabilities, Ms. Myers describes the "movement" as initially a bottom-up effort led by specific store managers. Twenty years ago, while meeting with a new store manager she was introduced to a new bakery employee with Down Syndrome who had become an excellent employee with an outstanding safety record. Upon hearing this, the current President began reinforcing similar hiring efforts being made throughout the company. Mr. Robert Deems, who moved from Oregon to become Manager of Retail Operations, further pushed the outreach effort to hire individuals with disabilities. Today, President Greg Sparks continues to underscore community outreach efforts to increase the employment of people with disabilities.

Ms. Myers says, "It is all about having a diverse workforce reflecting our clientele - this type of effort should have become prevalent and popular a long time ago." The company has truly diversified in its hiring effort and has more than a hundred employees with disabilities. The company has hired qualified individuals with a variety of disabilities to include psychiatric disabilities, blindness deafness, cognitive disabilities, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, and multiple sclerosis. Examples of positions include checker, maintenance worker, demonstrator, deli and bakery worker, and butcher assistant. The company has been very open to supported employment which supplies a job coach for

new employees with significant disabilities. All stores and have worked effectively with Easter Seals, Goodwill, Washington Vocational Services, State Vocational Rehabilitation, Lighthouse for the Blind, Vadis Northwest, and other community rehabilitation service providers.

Ronald Brown, works 14 hours a week using tactile signing by his job coach (touch through his hands) to sequence tasks he must accomplish at his job. He bales boxes, empties trash, cleans surfaces in the break room, and helps other co-workers as needed. Although requiring support within the community on a 24 hour basis, he is independent in paying his own bills, taxes, and getting involved in community activities.

James O'Neal, has some severe facial disfigurement caused by neurofibromatosis. He has progressed from courtesy clerk to helper clerk, customer service clerk, and checker in less than three years. Scott Wahl, the manager who hired Jim, stated that "he had been a customer who I got to know as people friendly, you just felt good being around him. Reviewing his past work history he only had two sick days in 18 years on his prior job. After hiring Jim, he became my go-to person, I used him everywhere and he's had no absences in three years." Jim is close to earning \$16.85 per hour, with overtime additional and a highly valued employee.

Patrick Spraw and Todd Harris, who both use a wheelchair, work as courtesy clerks, with Patrick also functioning as a greeter and in customer service. They truly enjoy the customers and the customers "want to know where they are if they are not at work" says store manager, Steve Mooers. These two individuals each work 20 hours a week. Other employees with cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis work at this store as courtesy clerks and checkers. The checkstands at this store and others has been lowered/modified to accommodate those with physical disabilities.

The company targets much of its community charitable giving based upon the disabilities prevalent within their own workforce. Ms. Myers notes that the employees with disabilities that she profiled in this paper are simply the ones the division headquarters are aware of. She believes the majority of hires with disabilities have still not come to divisional attention. Ms. Myers, through her magazine Safeway Checkout, cyclically highlights stories of success and triumph over adversity by employees with disabilities throughout the Northwest division. This effort not only recognizes achievements of the employee with a disability and responsive store management, but also highlights some of the concerns these individuals have for reasonable accommodation as a point of awareness. It is not unusual for a non-profit disability related organization to receive more than \$40,000 in a given month based upon Northwest Safeways finding outreach in its behalf.

Unique Best Practices

There are a number of practices the Safeway stores perform that are truly outstanding and deserve recognition.

- This is a "bottom-up" and a "top-down" effort by store management and divisional administration. This includes the underscoring of this "inclusivity" effort by division presidents and other administrators. Ms. Myers' effort to feature exemplary hiring practices in her Checkout magazine and integrate this work with the promotion of tangible financial donations to individual disability groups illustrates this.
- Store managers have been responsive to any number of rehabilitation agencies or people with disabilities that have approached them. In a number of cases, they have not shied away from the more difficult placement efforts and the inclusion of rehabilitation support personnel, to include trainers on the job site, during high visibility portions of the day.
- Safeway's Northwest Division has received numerous awards in relation to hiring policies of the disabled to include those of the Governor's Committee on Employment of Those With Disability, and regional Goodwill Industries, etc.

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McMahon, B., Wehman, P., Brooke, V., Habeck, R., Green, H., and Fraser, R. (2004). Business, Disability and Employment: Corporate Models of Success. A Collection of Successful Approaches Reported from 20 Employers. Richmond: Virginia Commonwealth University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports and Job Retention.