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FEATURE

Off to Work

Finding Meaningful Employment
for Adults with Autism

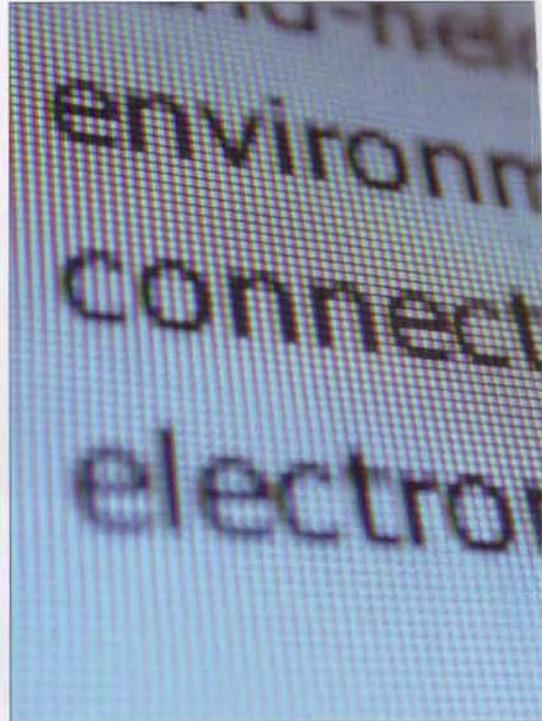
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Digital Imaging *Good for Adults on the Spectrum, Good for Business*

BY ROBIN GURLEY



OFTEN, IF PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES CAN OBTAIN PAID JOBS AT ALL, THEY TEND TO BE LOW-PAYING POSITIONS IN SERVICE INDUSTRIES, SUCH AS FAST FOOD, LAUNDRY AND JANITORIAL SERVICES. SKILLED OFFICE JOBS NORMALLY ARE CONSIDERED TO BE OUT OF REACH FOR THIS UNDER-SERVED, UNDER-EMPLOYED GROUP. A PROGRAM IN MINNESOTA, HOWEVER, IS CHANGING THIS REALITY FOR MANY PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES. IN ADDITION, IT IS HELPING BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS SAVE BOTH MONEY AND TIME BY MOVING THEIR PAPER FILES TO ELECTRONIC FORMAT.



This innovative partnership, spearheaded by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, is providing adults with developmental disabilities (including those with autism) with good jobs and wages, and simplifying record-keeping for many organizations in the state. Adults with developmental disabilities are being put to work scanning, indexing and coding millions of pages of documents for public and private sector organizations. The benefits to companies are huge, not the least of which include freeing up countless square feet of office space, eliminating costs for off-site document storage, and allowing easier and faster access and retrieval of information, as well as greater data protection.

Background and Public Sector Projects

The program began as a test project to transfer the council's enormous paper files to a computer disk or hard drive. Given the organization's mission, it made sense to employ people with developmental disabilities to do the work. A private service provider supplied 18 workers and their job coaches, who transferred 27,000 pages of documents to digital images in 18 months. Efficiency subsequently improved as a team of two workers digitized 10,000 pages in just over a month. The council project was declared a success. Not only had the project been cost effective and competitively priced, but it paid its workers more than minimum wage. Most importantly, the workers proved to be capable of handling the job duties and conveyed a high level of satisfaction with their accomplishments.

Word spread of the success of the test project, and initial projects were implemented at other public sector agencies in the area, including the Olmstead County Corrections Department and the Minnesota Human Services Department. At the corrections department, adults with developmental disabilities were hired to work on a backlog of records in the digital imaging area due to staff cuts. In an 18-month period, they digitized about 400,000 pages, eliminating the backlog. Currently two people with developmental disabilities are scanning files of closed cases at a rate of 2,000 pages per day.

In planning a move to new headquarters in 2004, staff in

The Private Sector

Although public sector organizations were the initial adopters of this program, the private sector also has eagerly come on board. The Governor's Council Chairman, Shamus O'Meara, has encouraged his law firm, Johnson & Condon, to contract with a service provider to eliminate its backlog of paper files. From May through September 2006, 500,000 documents were scanned by four people working four hours a day. It will take two years to eradicate the backlog, and the project will continue beyond that to keep files up-to-date. Trendex, a document production company, also hired three people with developmental disabilities to digitize its paper documents. In two months, a year's worth of customer records was digitally recorded into the computer system, enabling employees to access and browse documents electronically. Trendex's owner estimates that the project annually will save him the salaries of two full-time workers. Other companies that have launched document imaging projects using adults with disabilities include Riverview Bank and Ameriprise, a Minneapolis financial services firm.

Upcoming Projects

There are about 50 digital imaging projects underway in the state, employing hundreds of people with developmental disabilities, many with autism. New projects are being launched as organizations learn about the benefits and cost savings of digital

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the human services department hoped to minimize the space needed by purging many of its paper files. They hired 16 workers who scanned 3.5 million pages in 18-months. When the new building was ready, the digital imaging project had freed up so much space that two floors were taken out of the building plan, generating enormous cost savings for the state.

Currently, 16 workers work two shifts, from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m., at the agency's central document conversion center in St. Paul, and more than 10 million documents are stored digitally in a virtual file.

imaging. For example, the state court system is moving to document imaging next year as part of a new strategic plan. Various local government agencies also are launching projects, including the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Board, and Wabasha County Human Services.

Benefits to Employees

Digital imaging work appears to be a good fit for many workers, especially those with autism who tend to be proficient at technical, detail-oriented work. Many of them are earning more than minimum wage and are happy to be working in meaningful jobs in an office environment. These jobs have

boosted their self-confidence as they see themselves involved in something important and performing tasks they didn't think they could do. Jeff Shaffer of North Branch, Minn., who works on a major document imaging project at the Minnesota Department of Human Services, said, "We're working for the state, and that means it's important. I never had a government job before."

Even more importantly, employees are learning new job skills on high-tech equipment, which bodes well for future employment, and are improving their social and workplace skills by working with others. Employees are proud and satisfied with their accomplishments on the job, and enjoy working as part of a team. "I like the whole program. I enjoy it. I'm going to stay with the team," Shaffer added.

Because many people with developmental disabilities need and thrive on routine and predictability, the often repetitive nature of the work is comfortable for them. They receive on-the-job training, and most organizations have put specific procedures and guidelines in place. Therefore, workers know exactly what is expected of them and try hard to fulfill those expectations. According to Minnesota State Operated Community Services placement coordinator Heidi Forbes, "Once they learn it, it's the same thing every day. It's important to these people to be consistent. Change can be hard; repetitive is good. In fact, some folks have been successful here, after they hadn't been elsewhere."

To instill more confidence in prospective workers and offer peace of mind for employers who may be unsure about hiring people with developmental disabilities, the Governor's Council is looking at providing digital imaging certification for job coaches and competency testing for workers. Some students also are learning to use scanners and software in their education programs, so that they are trained and familiar with the equipment when they enter the digital imaging field.

Much of the work involves preparing the documents for scanning by removing paper clips and staples, opening folded papers and taping any tears. Depending on the project, specific digital imaging job tasks can include:

- organizing the work area
- preparing files for scanning (i.e., removing clips, staples, etc.)
- copying and collating
- jogging files
- scanning files
- indexing and coding the imaged files (in the computer)
- releasing batches to the system
- doing quality check and control

- recycling files (pulling reusable papers and folders, and dumping the remainder into recycle bins)
- moving files out to the disposal area

Benefits to Businesses

Businesses that have embarked on digital scanning projects are reaping the rewards in major cost and space savings. For example, 10,000 pages of paper records require storage in a four-foot wide file cabinet, but can be electronically stored on one computer disk. Hiring people with developmental disabilities also garners large cost savings compared to contracting with outside vendors. In addition, companies get the satisfaction of providing an under-served, under-employed, hard-working sector of the workforce with skilled, professional employment. Also, for those individuals who are unable to read, concerns about the confidentiality of sensitive documents are not an issue for employers. More importantly, the peace of mind that comes with having documents in electronic format is immeasurable, as the threat of fire or water damage is eliminated.

The bottom line: People with developmental disabilities make good employees. A survey of more than 600 Minnesota employers showed that employees with physical or sensory disabilities rated equal to or higher than coworkers in similar positions on virtually all performance measures. Also, the benefits of providing accommodations, when needed, outweighed the costs of providing them. Employees approach their jobs diligently, exhibit high levels of accuracy and have superior attendance records. For these reasons, many employers are finding additional work opportunities for their employees with developmental disabilities after digital imaging projects are completed.

Making the Move to Digital Imaging

How do companies begin the process of digitizing their paper files? According to Shamus O'Meara, organizations must first see the need for the activity, and, secondly, they need to see the opportunity for workers with disabilities to be involved. When a company is ready to begin a digital imaging project, it first should approach its board of directors for advice and approval. The organization then should contact the Governor's Council, which can provide brochures on the program and show a video to management to gauge their interest. The council also offers regular seminars on digital imaging to the public to which vendors are invited, and can recommend service providers and equipment vendors in specific geographical areas. In fact, some vendors are making the process even easier by partnering with service providers to offer digital imaging.

Minnesota Department of Administration Commissioner Dana Badgerow said it's easy for companies to start digitizing their files. "One needs only to be committed to doing it, recognizing the issue, and then being aware of the availability of this enormously talented workforce." Once companies get on board, they often are astounded at the speed at which a backlog of papers can be eliminated, and are thrilled with the end result.

According to Dan Reed, a member of the Governor's Council and director of marketing and development for Partnership Resources, a local service provider, "Companies never think they can get something like this done. It's great to see the relief and satisfaction on people's faces once a job is completed."

The Future of Digital Imaging

The future of digital imaging is promising. The program in Minnesota has demonstrated its success by creating meaningful jobs for people with developmental disabilities and serving as a cost-effective business solution. In fact, the Minnesota Department of Human Services recently received an award

Council is putting great effort into promoting the program and increasing the numbers of people with disabilities working on these projects. O'Meara's law firm has been instrumental in getting the word out about the program to the private sector, especially other law firms.

Despite his enthusiasm about the increase in digital imaging projects throughout the state, however, Reed with the partnership Resources, stresses that maintaining project quality is crucial. "We want to keep sharing information, maintain project quality and make sure the jobs are done right."

Former U.S. Sen. Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.), co-author of the Americans with Disabilities Act, stated that "digital imaging dramatically increases employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities. It is an excellent example of public-private partnering to improve the lives and health of our communities, and should be a model for inclusion in our nation's workforce."

Dr. Collen Wieck, executive director of the Minnesota Governor's Council believes that the digital imaging field has great potential for expanding employment opportunities

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from the International Computerworld Honors Program for its digital imaging project and for hiring people with developmental disabilities to do the work. The success of this project is attributed to an exemplary employer-employee partnership. This achievement proves that the program has the potential to be expanded throughout the state, and even the nation. Governments, banks, law firms, health care companies, and state and federal court systems, among others, are looking to the promise of computer disk storage to liberate them from their paper burdens.

And advocates for the disabled see the unlimited potential of digital conversion projects for their clients. The market for digital imaging services is enormous, and as organizations see the success other companies have had employing workers with developmental disabilities to do their digital imaging, they are becoming more open to the idea. The Governor's

for the developmentally disabled. "There are a great many organizations in the state with a need for such work, including government agencies, nonprofits and private companies, and I would hope that they would consider employing people with developmental disabilities in these document imaging activities."

For more information on the digital imaging program in Minnesota, visit the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities Web site at www.mncdd.org/extra/imaging.htm, or contact Sherie Wallace, project manager, at 651-452-9800 or 877-832-4548 (toll-free) or e-mail: sherie@wallacegroup.com.

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