

## Commentary: The New Competitive Edge

*Thinking of people as proficient in a different way — rather than ‘disabled’ — could take your company to new heights.*

Tom Everill | November 2013 | FROM THE PRINT EDITION



**THE PUGET SOUND REGION** has long been a global hub of innovation at the forefront of change. Pioneers in aircraft, computer technology, software, renewable energy, coffee, online retailing, even grunge rock — the Seattle area seems to have an outsize impact on the course of human evolution. What’s next? How do we keep our edge in the face of fierce competition and complexity?

One approach that has worked well for Northwest Center is to harness the enormous power of human diversity to drive productivity, quality, innovation and customer satisfaction. Advocates have pleaded with business for decades to hire people with developmental disabilities, arguing that it is “the right thing to do” and a “way to give back” to the community, as if inclusion were some kind of benevolent compromise. But our experience suggests something very different.

Our company is dedicated to the principle of inclusion for people of all abilities and to the idea that people with developmental conditions such as autism, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy can make meaningful contributions in the workplace. We have learned that the more we commit to building, nurturing and leveraging a neurodiverse workforce, the more successful our businesses become.

We are not alone. *The Huffington Post* reported recently on the growing movement among major companies to employ people with disabilities “not out of charity, but as a business decision.” A number of major corporations, including Walgreens, Procter & Gamble, GlaxoSmithKline, Iron Mountain and IBM — which first began hiring people with perceived disabilities as a matter of corporate social responsibility — are now integrating their workforces as fast as they can for bottom-line economic reasons. Walgreens, for example, experienced a 20 percent efficiency boost in its Anderson, South Carolina, distribution center after adapting it for “disability employment.” Meanwhile, IT consulting firms and software giants like SAP have announced initiatives to recruit employees with autism, not to give back but to make their companies more competitive.

What’s going on here? How does hiring people with disabilities improve business performance? Our experience suggests three key answers.

**DIVERSITY, NOT DISABILITY.** First, the word “disability” itself frames the issue in the wrong way. At Northwest Center, we have learned to see developmental conditions like autism and Down syndrome not as limitations but rather as a rich source of unique qualities to be leveraged. In our business, employees who are able to concentrate on repetitive work and perfection to the point of obsession are a valuable asset, not in spite of their condition but because of it. The neurodiversity of our workforce has become a significant competitive advantage that enables us to astonish customers, most of them well-known global brands, with a level of quality and innovation they rarely experience. To see people only through the lens of “disability” is to overlook extraordinary human and business value.

**NEW PERSPECTIVES.** People who experience the world differently offer unique perspectives not available anywhere else. At Northwest Center, the diversity of our workforce requires us to pay extra attention to processes and work flow, which, in turn, improves quality and productivity. As Scott Page, an economist at the University of Michigan, points out in his book, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools and Societies*, seeing a problem from the right perspective makes it easier to solve. Take, for example, the employee in our electronics factory whose condition limits her capacity to work in three dimensions. Unable to perform a preassembly task the way our shop foreman was teaching her, she finally asked if she could simply put the whole thing down on her workbench, thereby turning our complex three-dimensional process into a much simpler two-dimensional job, a more efficient technique that was quickly installed throughout the factory. Is she “disabled” or is her unique perspective teaching us principles of lean manufacturing?

**INCLUSION ELICITS THE BEST FROM EVERYONE.** Employers who hire people with developmental conditions appreciate the positive effect on the person hired. Everyone needs a job, after all. What frequently comes as a complete surprise is the transformative effect inclusion has on everyone else. How is it that hiring people with developmental conditions so often improves morale, reduces absenteeism, improves same-store sales and increases customer satisfaction? The answer is that we are all bundles of potential and that relationships elicit that potential. Including people who experience the world differently draws out in everyone else the hidden potentials that can't be opened any other way.

The Seattle business community has long been an innovative creator of markets and best practices, the envy of the world. How do we keep pace? Harnessing the power of human diversity at scale could take us to a completely new level and help secure our region's rightful place at the forefront of global change.

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