

Keeping the doors open during COVID-19: Lessons learned from an employer of people with disabilities

When COVID-19 hit, every business, organization, manufacturer and service provider had to completely reevaluate how it operated (if it could operate at all) and make predictions about an unknown future. As a nonprofit manufacturer that employs hundreds of people with disabilities across northern Minnesota and the Twin Cities, MDI has had some unique challenges to address. Our business supporting at least 28 of our customers, including the United States Postal Service, was deemed essential in March, which meant we could still operate our four facilities. However, many of our employees with disabilities face higher COVID-19 risk factors, which meant every precaution had to be taken. But one thing that remained steadfast was the foundational value of our business: putting employees and customers first.

Our model of providing meaningful employment empowered us to act swiftly, communicate effectively and enact a COVID-19 preparedness plan for our employees in a matter of days. With employee support staff already in place and strong communications between employees, floor managers and administrative staff, we were able to create individualized plans based on each employee's health and comfort level, and determine what was needed to ensure the safety of MDI employees coming to work each day.

We immediately socially distanced our workstations and made work-from-home arrangements for employees who are able. We invested in more disinfecting products, including a sanitizing machine to quickly and fully clean our facilities. We provided face masks, adjusted shift schedules to minimize congestion and enacted policies to limit who can enter our facilities beyond employees. Complying with the state's face mask mandate required minimal adjustments to our preparedness plan. Most of all, our employees are taking this virus, protecting themselves, families and coworkers seriously.

To date, we have not had a case of COVID-19 at any of our facilities. During the pandemic, 140 of our employees went on furlough due to health risk concerns and some decline in business. Today only 36 people remain furloughed and we are bringing back more of our team members each week.

This July marks the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act – a monumental piece of legislation that protects people with disabilities from discrimination. It was a first step in building an inclusive environment for people with disabilities. At MDI, our values take it further by prioritizing our employees and understanding their abilities, rather than focusing on what they cannot do. This enduring belief positioned us to be flexible, innovative and responsive during a worldwide crisis. Our philosophy that well-supported employees result in high-quality products and satisfied customers is proving to be more relevant now more than ever.

We continue to see a bright future for MDI and its employees, especially on the Iron Range. We intend to hire 80 full-time employees in this region over the next 10 years by investing \$2.7 million in a polypropylene extruder for our Grand Rapids facility. This tool, which would expand our offerings, requires operators and creates plastic sheets that become boxes, totes and trays for commercial businesses.

MDI is committed to impacting 2,500 lives by 2026 through employment opportunities and services for people with disabilities. And as our economy slowly and measuredly begins to plan for a post-vaccine

future, our neighbors and community members can count on MDI to provide the independence, confidence and purpose that employment brings for people with and without disabilities.

Peter McDermott is the president and CEO at MDI, a trusted Minnesota manufacturer and social enterprise with the mission to provide employment opportunities and services for people with disabilities.