

## **Recognizing the contributions of workers with disabilities**

*By: Steve Reinardy*

My name is Steve Reinardy, and I was born with Familial Muscular Dystrophy and a stuttering defect – but that’s not how I define myself. I’ve always been motivated to learn and have a strong desire to succeed. Through hard work and getting the support I needed, I graduated from Hastings High School with a 3.7 GPA in 1990. Despite my successes in school, my adult life has been challenging because it’s hard for a person with disabilities to get a job.

In Minnesota, the employment rate of people ages 21 to 64 with disabilities is 44 percent. For the general population it is 84 percent. Individuals with disabilities are also overrepresented in part-time and lower-paying positions. Why is this the case? A recent study conducted by the University of St. Thomas’ Opus College of Business found that employer perspective plays a significant role in hiring people with disabilities.

I’m one of the lucky ones. I was hired at Minnesota Diversified Industries (MDI) in 2011, and it was then that my job challenges ended. In my opinion, MDI has one of the most unique business models in the state. It’s a nonprofit manufacturer, and nearly half of its employees are people with disabilities, like me.

When they hired me, MDI focused on my abilities and strengths. They told me that my strong work ethic, great attitude, and determination would help me be successful in a janitorial position. I have also learned several different positions such as assembly, welding, packaging and machine maintenance. MDI cares about me. They understand my strengths and my weaknesses and they help me work through them. I’m lucky to work for a company that evaluates employees based on what they can do, rather than focusing on their limitations.

Minnesotans of all abilities deserve good, safe jobs. Having a job gives me purpose. Living a structured life, earning money, and being part of a team makes me feel confident and fulfilled.

I know firsthand that people with disabilities can offer meaningful contributions to the workforce, and I hope other employers will broaden their mindset when it comes to hiring new employees. When people think of workplace diversity, they often think of race, culture, and even age. Individuals with disabilities are often forgotten in conversations about diversity. Companies that are mindful of all diversity elements – and are committed to having a workplace that represents the world we live in – are making the world a better place. We all play an important role in making a more inclusive workforce, where every person is recognized for his or her abilities.

This National Disability Employment Awareness Month, I encourage Minnesotans to reach out to people with disabilities. Ask them about their career aspirations, the challenges they’ve encountered, and listen to their stories. I bet you’ll be glad you did.

*Steve Reinardy works at MDI, a leading corrugated plastic manufacturer **and production services provider**, with nearly half of its workforce comprised of people with disabilities. He lives in Inver Grove Heights.*