

OPINION EXCHANGE

More than ever, jobs for the disabled are vital

Today's labor shortage offers an incredible opportunity to employ this undervalued workforce.

By Eric Black | OCTOBER 4, 2021 – 5:45PM

While we look ahead to begin the path to recovery, COVID-19 remains a great economic uncertainty for employers and employees alike.

It is an even more sobering reality for those with disabilities. One in five has become unemployed since the start of the pandemic.

Historically, people with disabilities — both visible and not — have had a higher unemployment rate than the overall population. The pandemic has only amplified the disparity. From March to April 2020, the number of employed people with disabilities fell by 20%, while the number of employed people without disabilities decreased by 14%.

Today's labor shortage offers an incredible opportunity to employ this undervalued workforce. October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month, an annual marking of the contributions of thousands of our neighbors who overcome daily barriers to independence to strengthen hundreds of workplaces and our state's economy.

I'm in my first year as president and CEO of MDI ([When we hire a new employee, we focus on the person's abilities and strengths — not their limitations. This philosophy has helped MDI become what it is today: An inclusive business where people with and without disabilities work side by side to meet customer needs.](https://shared.outlook.inky.com/link?domain=www.mdi.org&t=ey]0eXAiOiJKV1QiLCJhbGciOiJFUzI1NiJ9_e]xlkF9rgzAUxb9LnkU73ckAoLjWjpOQEWoFwRwTEDfoOZjBYexlLrplkOt7Fp7rpktLKrcTDejf431MKwoFXqLv3cyZ15nuPrxVA6XKXuLXHz91GiINPbi4I-ukfuiTmvWoxTuYND7cRh4cfuZWHUZlf0nIRRh9zjgt]-Rt0rO61HF65wTIK4wLTXcbDfb29LjgovYMoKXNeCSLnlxhOt7RLzXh4eavpN-v0DMqRuIw.MEQCIHYCmZo3s5oYpUln8ylyT]gHcFoQXXBmp5_EkEvC-7mwAiB2P8uG1h0uZQE4J0oZzWks7f0tmh_AYVeprEOx633D2g], a local manufacturer and social enterprise with approximately half our workforce comprised of people with disabilities. At MDI, we provide skilled labor, resources and workspace to meticulously assemble and package products and create plastic solutions for companies of all sizes at four sites in Cohasset, Grand Rapids, Hibbing and Minneapolis.</p></div>
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More than 100,000 Minnesotans with disabilities — enough to comprise a city the size of Rochester — are skilled and ready to work but have not been given a fair shot. Our communities are strongest when all people can independently earn their own incomes. Good-paying jobs for folks with disabilities help bolster local tax bases and enrich our economy. Inclusive workplaces help people gain purpose and independence and are proven to be good for all workers and employers.



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I'm proud of the progress we have made — along with other Minnesota organizations committed to inclusion, from Arrowhead Medical to Boston

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But there's so much more we can do. As Minnesota employers large and small grow their workforces, let's never overlook people with disabilities. As we celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month, let's commit to becoming the leading state in the nation for inclusive employment.

Eric Black is president and CEO of Minneapolis-based manufacturer MDI.