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You Manage It! 1: Emerging Trends Walgreens Leads the Way in Utilizing Workers with Disabilities

In 2008, Walgreens, one of the nation's largest drugstore retailers, opened a state-of-the-art distribution center in Windsor, Connecticut. It is the company's second facility designed specifically to employ people with disabilities and is patterned after a similar one that opened in 2007 in South Carolina. Managers at both facilities share a goal of having people with disabilities fill at least one-third of the available jobs.

Walgreens has developed a reputation as a company that offers meaningful jobs to people with diverse backgrounds, with equal opportunities for advancement and job mobility. Company leaders intend to open more distribution centers that employ workers with disabilities and plan to use the experience in the facilities in Connecticut and South Carolina to provide managers in other units with information that will result in the hiring of more people with disabilities.

The South Carolina distribution center has a workforce of 400, with 50 percent having a disclosed physical or cognitive disability. Yet the facility's efficiency increased by 20 percent since its opening, after technology and process changes originally intended to accommodate workers with disabilities improved everyone's jobs. According to one of Walgreens' corporate executives of human resources, the experience of creating a disability-friendly environment in its distribution centers has been a transforming event for the company. Walgreens' success in hiring people with disabilities to work at its distribution centers has influenced more than a dozen U.S. companies, including Lowe's, Procter & Gamble, and Best Buy, to follow Walgreens' model.

Many employers do not share or practice Walgreens' level of long-term commitment and investment in hiring people with disabilities, but demographic trends suggest that more companies should—and ultimately will have to—as growth of the traditional labor pool slows, the workforce ages, and disability rates increase. As more business executives recognize and support the hiring and development of workers with disabilities, a chronically underemployed group, the business benefits of tapping this talent pool becomes clear.

Critical Thinking Questions

3-9. What are the tangible and intangible benefits that Walgreens receives by being a leader in hiring employees with disabilities?
3-10. Only about half of the people with disabilities who want to work are employed. What barriers do people with disabilities face in obtaining employment that are not concerns of other groups protected by the EEOC, such as minorities, women, or the aged?

Team Exercise

3-11. A serious barrier to employment of people with disabilities continues to be a perception problem. Managers and coworkers lack knowledge, awareness, and comfort in working with employees with disabilities. Form a team with three or four classmates and develop a strategy to overcome misperceptions surrounding utilizing employees with disabilities. Be ready to present your team's ideas to the rest of the class when called on by the instructor.

Experiential Exercise: Individual

3-12. The purpose of this exercise is to raise your self-awareness of some of the problems faced by employees with disabilities in the workforce. Assume that you have had an accident that will restrict your mobility for a year and that you will need to use a wheelchair while you recover from the accident. Consider how the restrictions on your mobility would affect your life as a student. What accommodations would your teachers need to make for you so you could attend your classes during the academic year? If you are employed on a part-time job, would you be able to continue doing this job as before in a wheelchair? If not, would the employer be able to restructure the job in a way so you could make a significant contribution as an employee? How would the job change? How could you convince your employer that you should be retained in your job? Be prepared to share your answers to these questions with other members of the class.

Sources:Based on Otto, B. (2013, January 14). Walgreens is not always the answer. Huffington Post. ***www.huffingtonpost.com*** *; Wells, S. (2008, April). Counting on workers with disabilities: The nation's largest minority remains an underused resource. HRMagazine, 45–49; Medical News Today. (2006, July 8). Walgreens recruits employees with disabilities through new highly accessible web site.* ***www.medicalnewstoday.com***

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