

# Eager to Work

Convenience stores are tapping into a new labor source: individuals with disabilities.

By

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Imagine an employee who loves coming to work and eagerly restocks shelves or cleans the restrooms. This employee also inspires your other workers to provide better customer service. Who is this stellar employee? An individual with a disability.

“Store leaders frequently say they are surprised by how much work the retail helpers do—more than they ever expected,” said Joalyn Torgerson, return to work coordinator at Kwik Trip, who manages the company’s Retail Helper Program, which places individuals with disabilities in the chain’s stores. “Another frequent comment I hear is how the retail helpers can change the mood in the store, making the stores happier places.”

In today’s tight labor market, more retail operators are discovering that individuals with disabilities fill more than empty positions—they contribute way beyond the tasks. “Hiring nontraditional workers has huge benefits on culture,” said Jeff Lenard, NACS vice president of strategic industry initiatives. “It changes the dynamic among workers as coworkers coach each other more. It also adds a level of joy. Many times, these workers have a renewed sense of purpose and drive that translates across the store, as they don’t take things like jobs for granted.”

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## Helping Hands

Kwik Trip has had “retail helpers”—which is what the company calls the position created for people with disabilities—for three decades. “Kwik Trip’s mission statement is to treat others like we like to be treated and make a difference in someone’s life,” Torgerson said. “This mission statement was the reason our store leaders started hiring individuals with disabilities years ago.”

A retail helper performs general cleaning, stocking and basic food prep tasks on a part-time basis. While a few stores had retail helpers over the years, in 2013, Kwik Trip decided to increase its hiring of individuals with disabilities, turning to the Wisconsin Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) for assistance. Once DVR spent time at Kwik Trip learning about the company and the retail helper positions, the organization began sending prescreened candidates to Kwik Trip stores to fill open positions.

“At that time, we only had about 40 retail helpers across our 447 stores,” Torgerson said. “As we started to see good job matches, other store leaders wanted a retail helper too.”

Kwik Trip replicated the program in Minnesota and Iowa, turning to vocational rehabilitation programs in those states to provide hiring recommendations and job training assistance. Today, more than 370 individuals with disabilities work in Kwik Trip locations.

“There are so many things that need to get done on a daily basis, from making coffee to stocking shelves to cleaning, that our employees and store leaders are delighted to have retail helpers work for a shift,” Torgerson said. All retail helpers start out as part time, and only work daytime shifts, but about a dozen have been promoted to full-time guest service co-workers with more opportunities and hours available to them.

“We wish every employee worked as hard as our retail helpers do,” she said. “These retail helpers have such a positive impact on our stores that we see it as a win-win situation for us.”

## Listening Ears

“Everyone deserves an opportunity to earn a living,” said Lynda McCarty, human resources and risk management director for Toot’n Totum headquartered in Amarillo, Texas. That attitude has led the 79-store chain to hire two individuals with hearing impairments.

The first worker, who is deaf, has been with the company for several years. “At the time of her hire, we had an assistant manager proficient in sign language, so it worked great. The individual cleaned and stocked shelves,” McCarty said.

When the assistant manager left, McCarty struggled to find a reliable interpreter for the worker’s monthly one-on-one meetings with team members but recently hired one. “The interpreter is meeting with our deaf team member and manager twice a month, so we are pumped about that,” she said.

Another disabled team member interacts with customers as a cashier. She wears a name badge indicating that she is hearing-impaired but can lip-read very well. “She’s been doing great,” McCarty added.

In addition, Toot’n Totum also has several employees who suffer from seizures, which is a more hidden disability. “We accommodate those individuals with extra time off work when necessary, as well as helping them communicate to colleagues the best way to respond if a seizure happens at work,” McCarty said.

McCarty wants to hire more individuals with disabilities and currently is researching ways to make this happen on a more regular basis. “With the labor market so tight these days, anyone who wants to come to work, I want to give them a chance,” she said.

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## Engaging Workers

For Leo Vercollone, CEO of Duxbury, Massachusetts-based Verc Enterprises, having employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) has been part of the company’s culture for a quarter-century. “We had a companywide goal of having 20% of our workforce be people with IDD, which we’ve achieved,” he said.

Verc works with Best Buddies and The Arc, two regional organizations that help adults with IDD find employment and receive vocational training. “The adult IDD population has an unemployment rate of around 70%,” Vercollone pointed out. “We wanted to work with these groups to bring some of those people into our stores.”

He touted the benefit of working with established organizations to help fill staffing needs with IDD individuals. “These groups contact us a couple of times a month with people they know can do jobs we have open, like landscaping, stocking and cleaning,” Vercollone said. “The organization also provides job coaches to help the new employee learn the job and fit into the store atmosphere.”

The rewards of employing individuals with disabilities outweigh any additional work on the company’s part. “What we’re looking for in our stores is engagement from our employees—engaged employees are concerned about your business, customers and fellow employees,” Vercollone said. “And our IDD employees are engaged from day one. They love having a job, and while many can’t do the level of work a regular worker can, from an engagement perspective, they are the leaders in our stores.”

These retailers all said their programs have generated goodwill both inside and outside their stores. “These workers help create a community spirit, which gives your store a competitive advantage,” Lenard said. “I guarantee that your coffee tastes better than any other place in town to people who have friends and family who are positively affected by your hiring programs.”

## Setting Up for Hiring Success

Starting a program to hire individuals with disabilities isn’t complicated. “You may find that you can learn something you didn’t know about yourself and your company when you start a program like this,” said Jeff Lenard, NACS vice president of strategic industry initiatives. Here are a few basic tips to running your own initiative to hire and employ disabled workers:

1. **Start small.** No matter the size of your company, the best advice is to start the program with one individual who comes in a few hours a week at a single location. With a slow rollout, you have time to iron out any kinks. In addition, these employees may need extra time to learn the job requirements. “Once other stores see how simple it is, they will be more than willing to come on board,” said Leo Vercollone, CEO of Verc Enterprises.
2. **Develop partnerships.** State and local vocational rehabilitation centers offer both job placement and on-the-ground support to individuals with disabilities. Working with such organizations helps to fill openings and orient the individuals to the particulars of a job. “We developed a single point of contact with the Wisconsin Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and decided to send all of our openings to them,” said Joalyn Torgerson, human resources director of Kwik Trip’s Retail Helper Program. Today, DVR screens candidates for open positions before sending the potential hires to Kwik Trip, which has streamlined the hiring process and provided excellent candidates.
3. **Have an open mind.** People with disabilities can do many of the needed tasks that encompass running a convenience store, so “don’t automatically discount those potential employees,” said Lynda McCarty, risk management director for Toot’n Totum. These retailers also emphasized that having an extra set of hands to help with cleaning and stocking helps other workers perform their jobs better too. “Everyone wants to be needed, and anyone who wants to work, we should take the time to find ways to accommodate their disability if possible.”
4. **Get employee buy-in.** Before you start a program that regularly brings in workers with disabilities, talk to your store managers and associates about the benefits such employees will bring to the store—and the support they will receive from outside organizations. “We tell our store managers that if they are looking for community involvement, these individuals live in the community, and their families and friends are huge advocates for them,” Vercollone said. “Those families and friends will appreciate what you’re doing for the IDD individual and will offer support as well.”

