



other employment barriers, as well as those with no special needs.

"We have a very integrate workforce," Franke said. "We also have employees who aren't in any of our programs."

Jennie Martin, assistant director with Vocational Support Services, a program of Goodwill Industries in

Menasha, has helped clients find jobs with Goodwill and several other employers in the Fox Valley, including banquet halls, restaurants, offices and cleaning companies.

Martin said most of Goodwill's client base has some type of disability, including cognitive, physical or anxiety disorders, but still can be opportune employees. Goodwill provides training to the clients before placing them at a job site, and over the years has established excellent relationships with several area businesses, such as the five Rogan's Shoes

stores in the Fox Valley.

Alex Annoye, a disability navigator for Workforce Economics Inc. in Oshkosh, helps disabled clients use employment programs in seven counties, including Winnebago, Outagamie and Fond du Lac. While increasing a client's employment abilities, Annoye said he wants to educate employers on the benefits of hiring employees with disabilities. That market is often underserved and underemployed.

"People with disabilities often are dedicated and better workers because they're glad to be working," said Rich Redman, director of marketing for Goodwill Industries of North Central Wisconsin.

### Breaking down barriers for job applicants

Without knowing it, employers also may set up barriers to job seekers. In some cases, online job applications can take a couple hours to complete, said Gary Ormsbee, vocational services manager with Clarity Care of Oshkosh. He works with staffing agencies and provides employment training services to a caseload of about 100 clients.

## Touting employment of those with disabilities

**Community Employment Opportunities unites local agencies with a common economic development goal**

When seven nonprofit social service agencies from the Fox Valley formed the Community Employment Opportunities program a few years ago, they did so with the goal of informing businesses and the public about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.

Representatives of Advocap, Clarity Care, Vocational Support Services, Employers Resource of Goodwill Industries, New Hope Center, Valley Packaging Industries and the Fox Valley Workforce Development Board joined together to form the organization.

"The point of the group is to collaborate. We're all trying to do the same thing," said Jennie Martin, assistant director for Vocational Support Services, a program of Goodwill in Menasha. Vocational Support Services provides job matching, training and coaching to clients with and without disabilities.

Besides hiring people and offering placement assistance, Community Employment Opportunities may provide assistive technology, offer financial incentives to businesses that hire their clients, and seeks to dispel myths about the employability of people with disabilities.

Alex Annoye, who works with Workforce Economics Inc. in Oshkosh, provides resources through area Job Centers and the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation for employees with disabilities. Recent examples of such

services included providing voice recognition software to a client and services for a client who struggles with vision.

Other service agencies, such as Valley Packaging Industries in Appleton, work hand-in-hand with the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, which helps agencies and employers cover their expenses to provide services and continue to employ clients with disabilities.

Community Employment Opportunities affiliates have shared job leads and borrowed job coaches from other agencies. They brainstorm together and use their years of combined experience to find new and creative ways to provide programming.

A few years ago, the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation asked Community Employment Opportunities to establish a single-rate proposal to help its clients find jobs, rather than seek individual rates from separate agencies, said Gary Ormsbee, vocational services manager with Clarity Care in Oshkosh.

The affiliated agencies developed rates as a collaborative unit for the Fox Valley service area, which ranks second in Wisconsin for job placements and closures. The state eventually developed an overall statewide rate that was partially based on the work of Community Employment Opportunities.

— by Kurt Rentmeester

"Online applications can be difficult, even for someone with great computer skills — let alone someone who might have none," Ormsbee said. "They are very long and very involved and are difficult for some people to comprehend, who could otherwise do a job that's available."

In some cases, Ormsbee said human resources departments might be attempting to make their own job easier by reducing the number of applicants they have to screen. He warns employers that doesn't always lead to the best pool of applicants.

Businesses often don't realize applicants with disabilities can represent the best option among candidates for a position because they can't see past the accommodations they need to provide. It's not only illegal to discriminate in hiring

**"A lot of times, the perception (of businesses) when they hear the word 'accommodations,' they think it's going to cost a ton of money."**

*Alex Annoye, disability navigator for Workforce Economics Inc.*

a particular candidate based on a disability, but it's important for many employers to recognize that providing accommodations doesn't have to be a tremendous burden.

"A lot of times, the perception (of businesses) when they hear the word 'accommodations,' they think it's going to cost a ton of money," Annoye said.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires many newly constructed buildings, for example, be handicap accessible.

### A no-cost option

Services from many of these organizations, such as Valley Packaging Industries or Workforce Economics, are available to employers at no charge.

"It's really underutilized," Annoye said. "The staffing agencies are more well-known. We provide a free service and potential benefits for employers who hire people with disabilities."

While the hiring process can be exhausting, Schultz of Landmark said it also can be exciting for businesses. New employees — with or without disabilities — can bring a fresh perspective to the workplace.

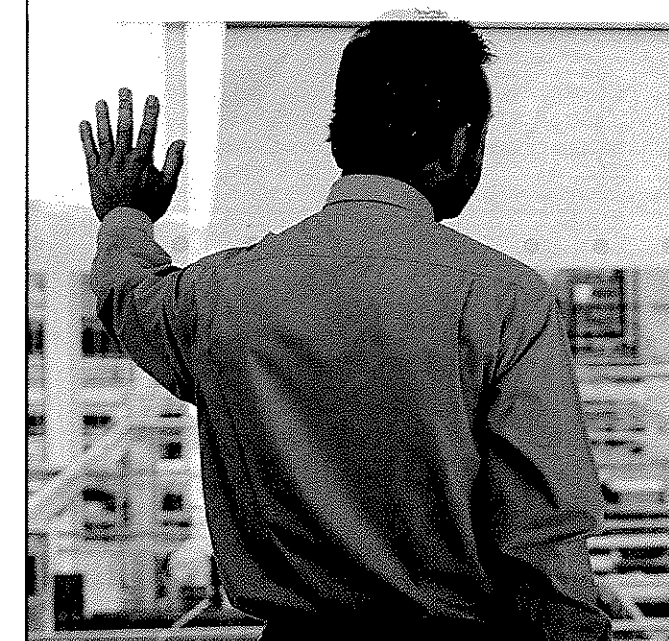
But finding qualified workers will continue to be a challenge. Landmark found work opportunities on a temporary basis for about 1,500 employees in the Fox Valley last year.

"The fact that we have so many opportunities and open jobs, that's a positive," Schultz said. "Companies are hiring again. Things are happening in business."

**B2B**

*Kurt Rentmeester is a freelance writer based in Kewaunee County who has been previously employed by daily newspapers in Manitowoc and Sheboygan.*

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