

Ted Brown on Driving Toyota's Disability Hiring Initiative

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Watching your child achieve professional success is a proud moment for many parents. For Ted Brown, vice president of Administration at Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Indiana (TMMI) in Princeton, Indiana, that milestone holds even greater significance when seeing his child persist to reach those heights despite physical, mental and social challenges.

Brown's 24-year-old son, Zach, was born with spina bifida — a condition that affects the spine and leaves the spinal cord vulnerable. Brown and his wife, Michelle, always dreamed of their son flourishing in society. And, thanks to Brown's commitment to his son and to the families of children with disabilities, that dream came true when Zach landed a position at the TMMI plant.

"I was really inspired to try to help him and other parents of children with disabilities to see their children successful and contributing to something that makes them feel proud," says Brown.

Steering Job Opportunities and Manifesting Dreams

Brown's mission was to find a way to include people with disabilities on the campus. So, in 2014, Brown and

his dedicated colleagues introduced an initiative to hire people with disabilities.

Today, TMMI's disabilities hiring programs are more than Brown's initial idea. They have added a transitional training program, an apprenticeship program, and have adapted their hiring process to ensure all applicants are able to show their best skills.



In 2020, nearly 18% of individuals with a disability were employed in the United States, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. While that's slightly down from the previous year, Toyota is committed to hiring more people like Ryleigh Ziebell, a weld employee at TMMI, who has a neurodevelopmental disorder—a complex range of disabilities in neurodevelopment and behavior and adaptive skills. She is pleased to have the opportunity to gain independence and have responsibilities, despite her learning disability.

“I have to physically have hands on, to learn,” Ziebell explains. “Toyota taught me how to physically do it, and I love it.”

It also gives her a whole new outlook on life. She adds, “I love coming to work. It makes me really happy. It opened up a lot of doors. I'm almost there to get my own apartment and move out on my own.”



Stories like Ziebell's are what exemplify Toyota's pillars of "Respect for People" and "Act for Others" that help drive the company's diversity and inclusion hiring initiatives forward.

"Mobility for all doesn't just mean putting individuals into a car," says Brown. "It's how we move people, and, to me, this program moves individuals differently. It can move an individual through their career. The other thing it can do is move people to help, be more respectful, [and] allow individuals to be successful."

Busting Myths to Grow Business

Despite some misconceptions, setting up employees with disabilities for success is possible and can be extremely beneficial to both the employee and the company.

"The number one myth is it's going to be too expensive because we've got to have all these accommodations," Brown says. "It's not accommodations, it's kaizen. It's how do we look for an easier way so that everyone can be successful."

In fact, the Job Accommodation Network has surveyed 3,369 U.S. employers since 2004 and have consistently found that more than half did not need to spend money to implement accommodations. Of those employers that incurred accommodation costs, the median one-time expenditure was \$500 to support an employee with a disability. That's proof that recruiting individuals with disabilities doesn't have to be costly — missing out on

what that person can bring to the organization is the real sacrifice.



Zach Brown

Being intentional and implementing inclusive hiring practices also dovetails with Toyota’s “Continuous Improvement” philosophy. Respecting people and giving them the space and freedom to bring their authentic selves to work no matter their differences, is at the heart of the company. Diversity and inclusion are essential for innovation and for creating an environment where ideas and career goals can flourish.

Driving Positive Momentum

Realizing the success of this program at TMMI, Toyota plants across North America are embracing the value of offering jobs to people with disabilities. U.S. plants including Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Kentucky; Toyota Motor Manufacturing, West Virginia; and Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Texas have all made efforts to provide more work opportunities to people with disabilities.

It’s no secret that teamwork and collaboration are required to move the needle toward a more inclusive and diverse workplace.

“The teamwork that comes [from] seeing these individuals successful, continues to grow,” says Brown. “That’s what I want to see Toyota work toward – how are we continuing to grow as a family and cheering each other

on.”

See the video below to learn more about TMMI’s pilot apprenticeship program.