

# Pairing firms with untapped talent

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## FULL TEXT

Md. nonprofit helps people with disabilities with training and jobs

With Asperger's syndrome, Joshua Nelson struggled with some social interactions and wasn't sure he'd have a career, much less one in the technology industry. The 30-year-old from Centreville had tried graduate school after college and a writing job, but neither worked well.

But after he underwent a training program with Melwood, a nonprofit organization based in Upper Marlboro that teaches people with disabilities job skills and links them with employers in the region, he landed a job at General Dynamics, an aerospace and defense technology company where he is a cybersecurity analyst.

"When I came to Melwood, I was floundering with my career and my life," Nelson said. "I got job training and skills, and they helped my professional development. They taught me how to do the job."

Melwood, which was founded more than 50 years ago, recently started several programs aimed at helping people with intellectual disabilities obtain career training and find jobs in fields including technology and software development, and as help desk coordinators at government agencies and private companies in the Washington region. It is a change, Melwood executives said, from helping those with disabilities to get into mainly manual jobs such as mail sorting, janitorial services and landscaping.

With a labor shortage in parts of the region, people with intellectual disabilities are an untapped market, Melwood officials say. The unemployment rate for those with disabilities is often double the national rate, they said.

Larysa Kautz, Melwood's president and chief executive, said many employers wrongly assume that someone with a cognitive disability will be "untrainable and unemployable."

"There's an assumption that because you have a disability, you aren't capable of doing the work," Kautz said. "We have to bust these myths and misperceptions that they can't do certain jobs."

Sometimes, she said, potential employers will tell her that they worry about placing Melwood clients in such jobs as electrician.

"They ask, 'Is that safe?'" she said. Her response: "We train them, and we have better safety records among our clients than most because we take extra care in training to make sure people can safely do their jobs in a space that's fully accessible by reading, hearing and seeing how to do it."

Melwood also trains managers and employees at companies and government agencies to work effectively with their colleagues who have disabilities. In interviews, Kautz said, employers are encouraged to not throw out just a set of "complicated fact-pattern questions" but instead give a person a problem and listen to that person's "process of how to start it and get to a solution."

Employers often become enlightened as they realize that people with intellectual disabilities have "already had to overcome barriers in their everyday lives of transportation, living independently and dealing with people's ticks," she said. "They're used to solving complex problems just in their normal, daily lives."

Melwood has placed roughly 40 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities at companies such as Wells Fargo, Amazon and JPMorgan Chase, and four Melwood participants are to start jobs soon at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

Teresa Thomas - who leads the neurodiverse talent enablement program at Mitre, a nonprofit that works with Melwood - said the greatest job-related hurdle for a person with an intellectual disability is sometimes just getting

a foot in the door for an interview. And in the interview, the usual social exercises of making eye contact, doing a handshake and making small talk are interactions that don't come naturally.

"That's really difficult for folks on the spectrum to learn," she said. Plus, if they do land a job, they tend to burn out because they "spend a lot of time trying to not seem autistic, and that can be really exhausting."

At the consulting firm KPMG, Sean Hoffman said his company found itself in a "war for talent" two years ago and could not find enough qualified workers.

"It was tough finding the right types of creative, new thinkers we needed," said Hoffman, who is a partner at the firm and whose 18-year-old is on the autism spectrum. "The market was hot."

Hoffman said that KPMG was hearing about hiring people who had neurodiversity challenges such as autism, dyslexia, attention deficit disorders or Asperger's syndrome, and that the company started working with Melwood to see if it could "tap into that talent."

Hoffman said many KPMG employees also went through Melwood's training for how to work with colleagues who have disabilities. Employees learned to be more direct in asking a colleague to do a project, use concrete words, avoid idioms and acronyms - all good practices, he said, for any company employee, with or without a disability. Melwood's training programs helped Nelson cope with social norms that are hard to manage with Asperger's. He said he learned that people expect eye contact during an interview and a handshake after a talk.

"For those of us with Asperger's, we need to think about and meet those expectations," Nelson said.

He said Melwood's 12-week training program also taught him to speak up for himself and explain to supervisors or colleagues that he could do the work but may need to "decompress" after completing a task or work at his own pace.

When Nelson started his job two years ago, he said, he thought he wouldn't like doing tech-related work but now enjoys it: "I went and I tried it and realized I could do this."

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