

IWIB member braids advertising expertise with personal experience in employing persons with autism

As this issue goes to publication, David Friedman is able to breathe a tentative sigh of relief. His business, AutonomyWorks Associates, like so many other businesses in the time of coronavirus, has been transitioning from a congregate workday at its facility in Downers Grove to a work-from-home platform. "Change can be hard for people with autism," said David, "and most of our employees had never worked from home before. While there have been a few bumps, I am incredibly proud of them all."

One of those employees is David's son Matt, 24, a student at College of DuPage and the reason David left behind a 25-year career in business to start AutonomyWorks. Matt has autism. "In many ways, Matt is a typical kid," says David. "He ran track and cross country in high school. He likes video games. Like a lot of people with autism, Matt is good at a lot of things, including numbers, details, and patterns. And like a lot of people with autism, some things are hard for him, including bilateral social interactions and executive functioning."

When students with disabilities turn 14 1/2 years of age, schools begin a

Why We IWIB.

In which members explain their reasons for serving workforce.

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process called transition planning that involves the school, the student, and parents as they prepare for life beyond high school. "While Matt has a lot of talents," said David, "college probably wasn't going to be the best destination for him immediately after high school. His social and executive functioning skills weren't likely to be ready for that environment." David and his wife recognized Matt's talents and marketable skills and assumed he would be able to enter the workforce in some capacity.

"When we started looking, we were stunned," said David. "The unemployment rate of adults with autism approaches 80 percent, and many of those who are working are in low skills jobs



David Friedman

rather than in roles that take advantage of their unique abilities."

The scale of the crisis will expand tremendously in the future; over the next decade, 500,000 people with autism will enter the workforce.

With workforce options limited for his own son, David started AutonomyWorks in 2012 specifically to create jobs that leverage the skills and talents of people with autism.

AutonomyWorks outsources common processes and tasks from businesses of all sizes, taking on projects like testing web sites, processing orders and financial transactions, and managing data. For example, the firm tests several thousand automotive web sites and provides hundreds of marketing reports each month.

"In most cases, our clients see significant improvements in quality and productivity by partnering with AutonomyWorks," said David.

AutonomyWorks employs about 40 people, some 80 percent of whom have autism or similar abilities. Most of its Associates are hired in partnership with the Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Rehabilitation Services (DHS-DRS). After DRS identifies and refers candidates with the appropriate skills, AutonomyWorks assesses, hires, and trains candidates for roles with the company.

David and AutonomyWorks also take their advocacy role seriously in motivating and educating other organi-

Call For Content

We publish this newsletter to celebrate the accomplishments of the workforce system and its clients on both the employer and job-seeker sides, and also to share ideas and best practices for fully actualizing federal and state workforce resources to promote economic development and transition targeted populations into meaningful careers.

We welcome the input of those in the system. If we do not explicitly solicit your participation, that does not mean we don't value it. Ideas for future stories in the IWIB newsletter should be directed to Dr. Scott Shook at Illinois State University (sashook@ilstu.edu) or IWIB board member Mike Conley (mike@trentonsun.net).

It is our goal to highlight each local workforce area in Illinois and the unique regional approaches they take to workforce development, to shine a light on each business member of IWIB and contextualize their reasons for serving in this volunteer capacity, and to lift up the many inspiring stories from around the state of job seekers leveraging the workforce system and alkalyzing it with their own initiative, responsibility, and accountability to overcome barriers to career pathways.

■ IWIB Member: *Friedman joined IWIB in 2015*

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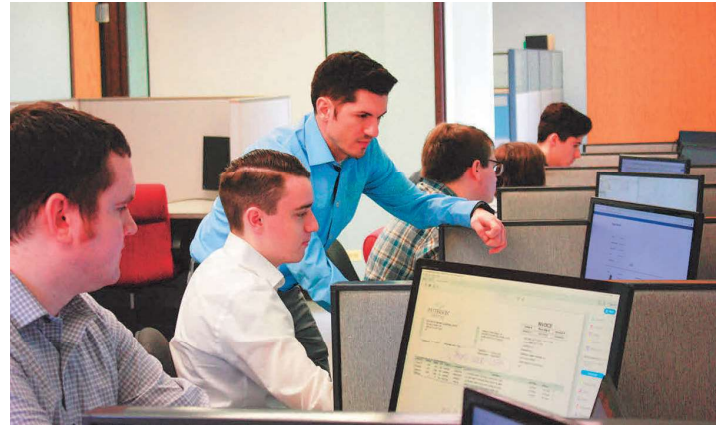
zations to employ those with disabilities. A couple of years ago, David was invited to testify before a Congressional committee on Small Business as part of a hearing titled, "Ready, Willing, and Able to Work: How Small Businesses Empower People with Developmental Disabilities."

Through his partnership with DRS, Dave was introduced to and joined the Illinois Workforce Innovation Board (IWIB) in 2015, to represent the business community general and people with disabilities in particular. He has participated on the Strategic Planning Committee and chaired the board's Technology Committee. He is currently a member of the board's Career Pathways for Targeted Populations (CPTP) committee. He recently accepted the appointment as the IWIB

representative on the Illinois State Rehabilitation Council, the group that advises the Department of Human Services secretary and head of DRS on issues affecting people with disabilities and provisions for rehabilitative services.

"The passion and energy of citizens and communities throughout the state have consistently impressed me during my time on the IWIB," said David. "When individuals, businesses, and institutions work together they can accomplish amazing things." Three of David's favorite workforce programs are the Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry Center to train returning citizens for employment, the Walgreens collaboration with DRS to employ disabled populations in Mt. Vernon, and the Apprenticeship 2020 program in Chicago.

David is a Minnesota native who grew up in Maryland. He moved to Illinois to



Autonomy Works at work.

attend college and never left. He lives in Hinsdale. He and his wife have four children and a dog: Matt along with Stacey, a senior majoring in public policy at Washington, D.C.-based American University; Jenna, a sophomore at the University of Maryland-Baltimore, where she majors in Computer Science; and Helene, an 18-year old senior at Hinsdale Central High School who plans to

attend Brandeis University outside Boston this fall; and Xena, a part beagle and part terrier ("We think she's 7," says David).

Prior to launching AutonomyWorks, David worked in digital marketing, headed a global digital advertising agency, and ran marketing for Sears Holdings, in addition to about ten years in management consulting.



The AutonomyWorks team prior to COVID-19 Social Distancing requirements.