

ACCESSIBILITY FOR ALL

October is National Employee Disability Awareness Month, which pays tribute to the accomplishments of the many people with disabilities whose work keeps the nation's economy strong.

A few years ago, Library Executive Director Kate Hall made the decision to move from merely supporting accessibility to taking a more proactive approach, which she believed would strengthen the entire organization.

To help make accessibility a priority, the library hired School and Special Services Librarian Sarah Rustman in 2016. The original intent was to focus on strengthening the approach to accessibility for patrons, but Kate realized that the library also needed to focus on another important demographic, its staff.

So Sarah, a certified ADA Coordinator, provided accessibility training with the goal of helping staff "understand what access really means and how to envision ways in which accessibility could enhance their day-to-day interactions" she said.

As a result, some library employees felt comfortable enough for the first time to discuss accessibility challenges they have had at work.

The experience also highlighted the need to support people with visible, as well as invisible disabilities—those that may not be apparent unless someone chooses to disclose them.

And it convinced Kate of the importance of trying to anticipate needs. "It's less about making changes on an individual basis and more about learning how to support an individual and then applying that help to others," she explains.

One example of anticipating needs is requiring easy-to-follow written job procedures for employees. This benefits someone with auditory processing challenges but also benefits all employees. Another example is that all of the library's workstations are now designed to address mobility issues by default.



Bryan Gutmann, Northbrook Public Library Technical Services Clerk

"We want to give staff the tools they need to be successful," she says, "rather than expecting someone with an accessibility concern to educate us."

"As an institution of lifelong learning, part of the learning journey is making sure we are creating an environment in which staff can thrive."

Kate Hall, Northbrook Public Library Executive Director

The next step was to look for ways to hire employees with diverse backgrounds and abilities.

To do this, Sarah Rustman reached out to TotalLink2Community, a nonprofit based in Northbrook that provides career and vocational services to individuals living with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

TotalLink's mission is to give its clients the same opportunities that neurotypical people would have.

"One way to do that is by working in your own community," said Alisa Martorano, Director of Development at TotalLink.

The library's partnership with TotalLink culminated in the filling of an open library position for one of their clients, Northbrook resident Bryan Gutmann.

Bryan joined the library's Technical Services department in February as a discarding clerk. He assists with data entry as well as the physical transport of thousands of discarded materials.

According to the latest numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 20.8 percent of people with disabilities were employed or looking for work compared to 68.7 percent of people without disabilities.

Emily Raming, TotalLink's Executive Director, says providing job opportunities "often helps people relieve their need to depend on state government funding. And that has a very big impact on the larger community."

TotalLink provided the guidance that the library needed to make the interview a success. For example, rather than a traditional interview, they recommended giving Bryan a tour of the department and a demonstration of the job role.

The position was a great fit, and Bryan says he finds the work fulfilling and is thankful for the support of his family and friends.

"I like the people I work with and I like that it's close to home and I like what I'm doing," he said.

"We feel lucky to have Bryan," Kate says. "In the past, the library has had a handful of discarding clerks, but Bryan is far and away the most efficient."

To learn more about how TotalLink2 Community can help you or your organization, visit www.totallink2.org.

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