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Outlook Business Solutions expands opportunities for blind professionals

by Becky McCarville

Outlook Business Solutions, a separate entity and sister company to Outlook Nebraska, was formed to expand employment opportunities for professionals who are blind and visually impaired. As a 20-year-old manufacturing company that provides over 60 jobs for people who are blind or visually impaired as part of the National Industries for the Blind and the federal AbilityOne program, the leadership team and board of directors of Outlook Nebraska wanted to expand into knowledge-based jobs and established a call center last fall.

The unemployment rate among people with vision loss in America is a staggering 70%.

“Our goal is to provide earning opportunities for knowledge-based professionals who happen to be blind or visually impaired,” said Vice President Natalie Hadley, who leads this startup business under the umbrella of Outlook Collaborative.

As part of restructuring to further the company’s mission, Outlook Collaborative was recently formed as the parent organization of Outlook Nebraska, Outlook Business Solutions, Outlook Enrichment and Outlook Properties. Eric Stueckrath serves as president and CEO of Outlook Collaborative.

Outlook Business Solutions recently expedited its vision to include services beyond the initial call center, adding marketing, website accessibility testing and virtual administrative assistant capabilities to help small and medium-sized businesses.

“The idea behind Outlook Business Solutions and the reason it has that name is that they wanted to leave it broad enough where it could encompass any sort of knowledge-based job that could be performed by somebody who’s blind or visually impaired,” Hadley said.

While adding marketing services had been a goal after the call center ramped up, Hadley proposed a quicker expansion of its additional services. Her proposal was approved this past March, and the marketing team from Outlook Nebraska joined Outlook Business Solutions.

Now Outlook Business Solutions has six on staff at the office, including two who have vision loss, and 10 to 12 freelance workers who are visually impaired.

The goal of the company is to have 50% of billable hours fulfilled by a visually impaired knowledge-based workforce.

Freelance workers are located in Omaha, Portland, Atlanta and Kansas City.

Word about employment opportunities is spreading throughout the blind community via networking, social media — namely



Vice President Natalie Hadley ... Responding to the needs of the visually impaired community by providing knowledge-based job opportunities.

LinkedIn — as well as participation in various podcasts like Beyond Blindness and Blind Abilities by Hadley and the company’s Senior Specialist Public Relations Rachel Carver. Hadley receives a couple of resumes a week through the company’s website, although not all job seekers are visually impaired.

“Because we’re owned by a nonprofit whose mission is to positively impact everyone who is blind and visually impaired, we give preference to those who are visually impaired,” she said.

Skills and services include writing, marketing strategy, graphic illustration, graphic art, photography/videography, virtual administrative assistant and website accessibility testing.

“This is not a sheltered workshop; these are skilled professionals. Some of them were born with their eye condition, some of them experienced loss of sight

later in life,” she said. “You look at a lot of the professionals that are doing work for Outlook Business Solutions — they manage their everyday lives. They are paying their bills, they are doing their banking, they are doing their work, they are raising their children. They know how to adapt to the sighted world.”

In fact, Keith Rosson, one of the company’s freelancers in Portland who has only a 25% field of vision and is legally blind, has created album and T-shirt designs for Green Day and the Goo Goo Dolls.

Another freelance worker who was previously an oncology nurse and lost her sight later in life has struggled because her high-level skills and training weren’t being used.

For “people who have had to change careers — [it] can be really traumatizing for somebody who loses their sight later in life,” she said. “There’s a lot of depression, there’s a lot of anxiety.”

Hadley noted that employers will sometimes shy away from hiring a person with disabilities because they are worried that they will need to make specific accommodations, or question whether they can do the job.

However, she said employers should just ask what they need.

“Whether that’s magnification software or a device, whether that’s screen reader software or whatever that is, they’ll tell you what they need,” she said. “Regardless of whether it’s more of a manufacturing-based job or a knowledge-based job, we have people in other places in the organization who have lost their sight later in life and spent years not working, looking for employment. And I’m not talking two to three years, I’m talking seven, eight, 10, 12 years that they looked for a job or felt like they couldn’t work.”

Another challenge is changing how people perceive blindness.

“Sighted people I think tend to assume that if somebody’s blind, they were born that way,” she said. “That if somebody’s blind they’re completely blind. [But] they might be legally blind. Sighted people don’t view vision loss as a spectrum.”

What people might not know is that one in four is at risk of severe vision loss because of an aging population and macular degeneration or diabetes and diabetic

retinopathy.

“Those come later in life and people can be mid-career and all of the sudden find out that they’re losing their sight, and that can be very gradual [or] it can be very sudden,” she said. “But it certainly is going to make a difference in how you perform your work, what kind of work you can do, what your employment opportunities are.”

Hadley anticipates huge growth with the company’s website accessibility testing expertise because business websites will need to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Another big reason: businesses who don’t have accessible websites can lose potential customers.

“Blind people have jobs and blind people have disposable income, and businesses who knowingly choose not to be accessible are really just cutting out a whole potential target market for themselves,” she said.

Outlook Business Solutions has performed some pilot tests with a couple of companies in Omaha, testing websites for accessibility — especially with screen reader software and fillable PDFs.

There is software available that will test websites, but it only catches about 25-30% of problems “so you actually need somebody who uses that screen reader every day to go through your site, to go through your PDFs,” she said.

For example, one of the companies they’re working with had a blind woman in their call center but the PDF she needed to fill out with information wasn’t accessible.

“We’re working with them so that she can be a fully productive employee and all it takes is a little work on making the PDF accessible as well to the screen reader,” she said.

Another area of growth is the virtual administrative assistant offering.

“That’s something that we’ll be looking at in the future,” she said. “Some of that could be a combination of a call center where maybe we’re offering to answer phones for businesses after hours or play that virtual receptionist [role]. But also, just basic administrative tasks like formatting a Word document, creating a PowerPoint presentation, maybe even some simple bookkeeping.”

“Where we’re looking is that small- and mid-size business that really has projects that they can’t get to, that they don’t have the skills in house to do and we’re confident that once they’ve used us for a job or two they will bring us more work because the people we have are really good.”

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