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Northwoods Commerce: Headwaters Inc. offers helping hands to area businesses

By Sue Schneider
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Terry Zander can sort and package 35 packs of Trueflight Manufacturing fletchings in a day. Helping with the task is support staff member Wendy Woodall.

Many business owners know the frustration of having too much work and not enough hands to help out. But a helping hand is just what Headwaters Inc. of Rhinelanders can offer—in fact, many helping hands.

The workforce at Headwaters is comprised of participants with special needs and varying levels of ability. But they are committed workers and with staff support, they can complete a wide variety of tasks, according to Headwaters director Mary Hardtke.

“We specialize in providing labor for jobs that may be too time-consuming for a business to set up itself or for specialized tasks that may need to be done quickly over a short time period,” she explains. All of the production programs at Headwaters provide people with disabilities an opportunity to expand their job skills while earning a paycheck.

“We do everything from cleaning and lawn care to mailing services and confidential shredding, as well as assembly work,” says Mary. “We are particularly well-known for our car detailing service. Ask any of our participants in that area and they will pull out the toothbrushes they use to get into those little spaces.”

One of the organization’s biggest partners is Drs. Foster and Smith of Rhinelanders, a pet supply business that contracts with Headwaters for a variety of services. “We sew and stuff thousands of dog chew toys and bag various types of bedding materials,” says Mary, “and one of our biggest operations is shrink-wrapping different items for shipping. During the Christmas holiday time, this place is packed!”

Participants at Headwaters have varying degrees of physical and mental abilities, and each is assessed and coached to help them make the most of those abilities. "If we can take a job and break it down into simple steps, we can make it work," Mary says. "Participants don't mind repetitive work and they are perfectionists. In my 10 years here, I can't recall any problem with quality control."

Trueflight Manufacturing Company of Manitowish Waters has been utilizing workers at Headwaters for more than 10 years. Plant manager Bob Link has nothing but good things to say about their work. "They've been the best partner we could hope for," he says. "We couldn't do what we need to do without them."

Trueflight packages and delivers fletchings, the feathers that grace the back end of arrows, all over the world. They need large boxes of fletchings to be sorted, checked for quality and packed into bags containing 101 feathers.

Headwaters has devised a simple method for their participants to accomplish this task using a cardboard template on which 20 feathers are laid after being carefully examined for defects. When the template is full, the feathers are gathered and placed in a container. When five containers are filled (plus one extra in its own container) they are all bagged together.

It's a satisfying task for Terry Zander of Pelican Lake, who has worked at Headwaters for more than 10 years. He can fill 30 to 35 packs a day with help from supervisors. "The large feathers are pretty easy to work with," says production supervisor Deanna Barlow. "The smaller ones are a little harder, and we take our time."

All over the Headwaters facility, participants are sewing, sorting, checking and cleaning. One area holds equipment for a full-service mailing station, from which dozens of local businesses and non-profit groups have had brochures and letters prepared and mailed at reduced rates.

"Headwaters serves over 90 participants in-house, but some of them are not exactly 'in-house,'" Mary explains. "We also send workers into the community to do lawn care for Saint Mary's Hospital and wayside area maintenance (RAM) for the highway rest areas in the tri-county area."

In addition, the Supported Employment Program, headed by employment specialist Sheila Pisut, gets participants out into the general workforce. "My job is to go out and sell our people," she says. "This program allows our participants to be successful and be an asset to area businesses."

With 35 participants currently holding jobs in the community, Sheila is confident of their abilities. "The hard part is getting them in the door. Once employers see what they can do, they love them. For our participants, their job means everything to them. You won't find a more enthusiastic worker."

And for businesses, hiring through Headwaters is a very low-risk proposition. A program with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation means that workers start out on a trial basis for up to six weeks at no charge to the employer. "Our job coaches come in to help in the beginning and make sure the employer is satisfied," says Sheila. "They gradually fade out when everyone is comfortable, but we promise a lifetime of support. We can come back any time there is a problem or the job changes."

Communication with business partners is key to Headwaters' success, according to Mary. "We are very good at setting up any operation that a business needs," she says. "We listen and respond; we know what our people can do and how we can help them do it. That can be a big help to a business that is overloaded and in need of support."

Headwaters support staff are innovative as well. Almost 30 years ago, John Aimone, auto supervisor, helped come up with the idea of setting up a car detailing station and the operation is still going strong today. "At that time, car dealers didn't do their own detailing," he says, "so we were really in demand. Now, we've expanded to servicing fleets from businesses such as TV 12 and we have the same individuals returning year after year. Right now we have a waiting list; we're keeping busy."

The primary goal of Headwaters will always be advocating for the welfare of people with disabilities, and they continue a deep commitment to future opportunities. "We're working with Nicolet College and the School District of Rhinelander to establish life-long education programs for our people," Mary says. "We want to expand our training to include specific skills that will enable people with disabilities to be certified as 'helpers' in various fields. We know they have the talent, and we need to help them get out into the business community and show what they can do."

Sue Schneider is a freelance writing living in Rhinelander.

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