

Inclusive Integrated employment:

I am proud to have worked for 25 years in a fully competitive integrated employment position starting in 1998 when as a high school senior, I had an internship through the Marriotts Bridges program as a clerk in the Distribution Center at Booz Allen Hamilton in McLean, VA. That internship turned into a staff employment that gave me opportunities to grow as an adult contributing and being treated as other employees in the company, earning equal pay and full benefits like everyone else. It started my career.

On June 27th, I reconnected at NDSS office with former Senator Tom Harkin, a hero and trailblazer for the disability community. He served as chair of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP). He authored the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and was its chief sponsor in the Senate. He was the key to changing the landscape for the employment of individuals like me. I am so thankful for Senator Tom Harkin for paving the way for me and many others. The Harkin Institute has recently joined the CEO commission.

For more info check the link <https://harkininstitute.drake.edu/2023/04/05/thi-enters-new-partnership-with-the-ceo-commission-for-disability-employment/>

This blog is to thank the Senator and reminisce on my testimony on March 2nd, 2011, when I had the honor to testify at the HELP Senate Committee chaired by then Senator Tom Harkin. He opened the hearing with this statement: “The title of this hearing is Improving Employment Opportunities for People with Intellectual Disabilities. We’re here today to examine the barriers, and, most importantly, identify solutions to increase the employment participation rate of individuals with disabilities. For this hearing, we focus first on persons with intellectual disabilities, because, in many ways, they have faced the most significant barriers and the lowest employment participation rates of any group of individuals with disabilities”.

The transcript of the full testimony can be found on the HELP archive <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112shrg80955/html/CHRG-112shrg80955.htm>

While we have made progress in post-secondary education and school to work transitions, I think that some of the issues discussed 12 years ago are still a concern and need to be addressed.

I was one of a panel of four and I will share here a few excerpts from my own testimony: I want to tell you about my career and what it means to me. Employment of people with intellectual disabilities is a smart business decision and a social responsibility. This is a familiar topic for Senator Harkin, who, many years ago, employed Dan Piper, an individual with Down syndrome to work at his district office in Iowa. Chairman Harkin is a pioneer in the employment of people with intellectual disabilities, and I was honored to be the first one to receive the Dan Piper Award in 2005 in Vancouver, Canada at the 9th World Down Syndrome Congress

My goal is to discuss how to promote the competitive, inclusive employment in our community. “One of us and not one among us”. What does that mean? That means I’m accepted in a group. It means that people respect me. They have expectations and they believe in me. It means that people acknowledge that I have skills and that I can contribute to the goals of a business.



- You can learn more about my employment opportunities in my book: “More Alike Than Different: My Life With Down Syndrome.” www.davideganadvocacy.com



My disability is not an obstacle, and I can think of all the things that I can do. Transition from school to work started for me with an internship as a clerk in the distribution center during the summer of my junior year in high school.

My first supervisor was great. She took it upon herself to teach me everything there was to know about being a clerk in the distribution center. I am treated like all other employees. I receive benefits, time off and an annual 360-degree assessment. Like everyone else, I go to compulsory training and participate in all-hands meetings and corporate events. The company cares about my personal and professional development. I also made many friends at work and one of them is Greg, a senior employee in the distribution center who knows me well and has been my role model. He truly cares about me and gives me guidance.

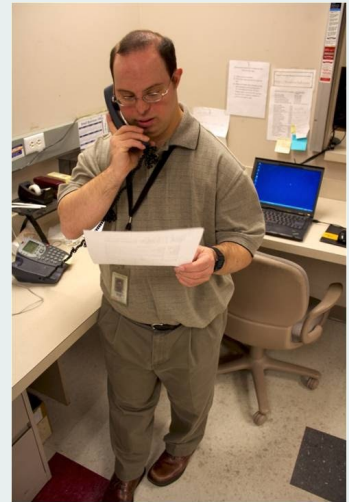
My company offered me more than a job. It is a career. The CEO of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Shrader, has stated: Work provides more than a paycheck. It brings dignity and community. When businesses open job opportunities to men and women with disabilities, everyone benefits--the individual, the company and society at large."

I enjoy my after-work activities in the community as an advocate promoting awareness that we are capable people. Inclusion also means that I have to give back to the community. When I was 12 years old, I was dreaming of winning the race in Special Olympics. I still like the competitions and want to win many races, but, now, I dare to dream about changing the way people think of us, changing the perceptions, opening doors for people to shine and overcome their disabilities, not only in sports, but in the workplace and at all levels of our society.

Mrs. Shriver, the founder of Special Olympics, believed in human dignity and inclusion. In her address at the 1987 World Games in Indiana, she said to the athletes: "You are the stars and the world is watching you. By your presence, you send a message to every village, every city and every nation. You send a message of hope and a message of victory. The right to play on any playing field, you have earned it. The right to study in any school, you have earned it. The right to hold a job, you have earned it. The right to be anyone's neighbor, you have earned it."

We need to change the world together, and we are. It is my role to demonstrate abilities, and it is our role, as a team, to make this happen.

Our goal is to make sure that all people with intellectual disabilities can launch successful careers. To achieve that goal, we need strong family and community supports, good education and social skills, internships during high school and seamless transition from school to work showing that we can achieve, because people have high expectations and value our contributions. We need mentors in the workplace, supervisors who are willing to take a risk and invest some time to teach us new skills to help us learn. This is what it means to have an inclusive workforce. This is how we fulfill our social responsibility, and it makes a good investment. And our nation, and the world, will be a better place for all of us--and you will not regret it--a place where people with intellectual disabilities do not have to hide and are fully accepted.



- You can learn more about my employment opportunities in my book: "More Alike Than Different: My Life With Down Syndrome."

www.davideganadvocacy.com

