

From the Columbus Business First:

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Greenleaf Job Training Services: Open your mind, find new business

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Finding qualified workers is one of the business community's biggest challenges today.

In fact, a recent National Federation of Independent Business report showed 33 percent of small business owners couldn't fill a job in April - the highest reading since November 2000.

Jennifer Kuntz, CEO of Greenleaf Job Training Services, had been hearing as much from fellow business owners in Central Ohio. Not only were they having difficulty finding qualified employees, some of their workers lacked certain soft skills, she said.



DAN TRITTSCHUH
Jennifer Kuntz

That's when a light bulb went off for Kuntz, who said she began to see the need for a business-to-business program that would help a company's staff develop or improve a variety of skills.

Founded 22 years ago, Greenleaf Job Training Services began by helping people with disabilities search for jobs and get hired, assisting them in overcoming barriers to employment so they could become self sufficient.

The Columbus-based company has since expanded to help all employees succeed in their roles and meet the needs of their employers by developing a program that provides customized soft-skill training.

Kuntz spoke with *Columbus Business First* about the benefits of helping business owners better utilize the resources they already have and about her newest program, which assists businesses with making accommodations for people with disabilities.

How did you change your business plan to work with all employees rather than only those with disabilities? For a lot of years, the training focus has been exclusively on helping people with disabilities maintain employment successfully. Our role has always been to serve as trainer to our client and facilitator for the business in which our client worked. Those relationships have not changed.

However, our training offerings have expanded to include the business side. For example, trainings on improvement of time use, effective ways to minimize interruptions, communication skills, written policy and procedure statements to address repeating problems.

Was there a moment when you realized the need for businesses to get help training employees in soft skills? It was a couple years ago when the employment market became harder to sell, with the decline in the number of people looking for work. It was becoming more of a struggle for employers to find qualified people. They didn't really have the luxury of time to wait around to hire the person because they could do the job (without that worker temporarily). That's where we came in. We had some large businesses we had worked several times with in relation to participants they had in mind. I had business contacts in mind and reached out to them and said, listen, we have this new pilot program in place. We tested it to see if it was viable. We tweaked the program as we went along.

What are the benefits of working with employees already at a company as opposed to trying to place workers at companies? They are familiar with their job and the company culture, and can usually articulate clearly what challenges they are experiencing. Employees appreciate it when the company they work for provides them with opportunities to learn new skills.

Did you have any startup costs associated with working with business' employees? A little bit – staff time and developing the program and the training tools. But it was absorbent. It was pretty easy to blend in with the rest of our services. We also experienced outgrowth from all of this. We work with a very large company, for example, who came to us and asked us to shift some employees who would be better suited to work in other areas, asking us to retrain them.

You also recently began a program that helps businesses better make accommodations for people with disabilities. What prompted the realization of this need? Evidence of the need has been mounting for years, but it wasn't until I was able to see past my own limited view for Greenleaf's services that development of the idea began. We repeatedly hear surprise and appreciation from coworkers and managers when they witness how impactful even the simplest device, or process or communication tip can be in helping people with disabilities.

How does including all people, including those with disabilities, ultimately help a company succeed? So many ways. Our approach is always to ensure a client's performance is consistent with established business standards. Inclusion of all and appreciation of people's differences strengthens teams. Empowerment builds self-esteem, which increases employee engagement at work. People want to feel that what they do matters, and when they're engaged in their work, staff retention rises, keeping costs associated with turnover low.

Christine Bryant is a freelance writer.