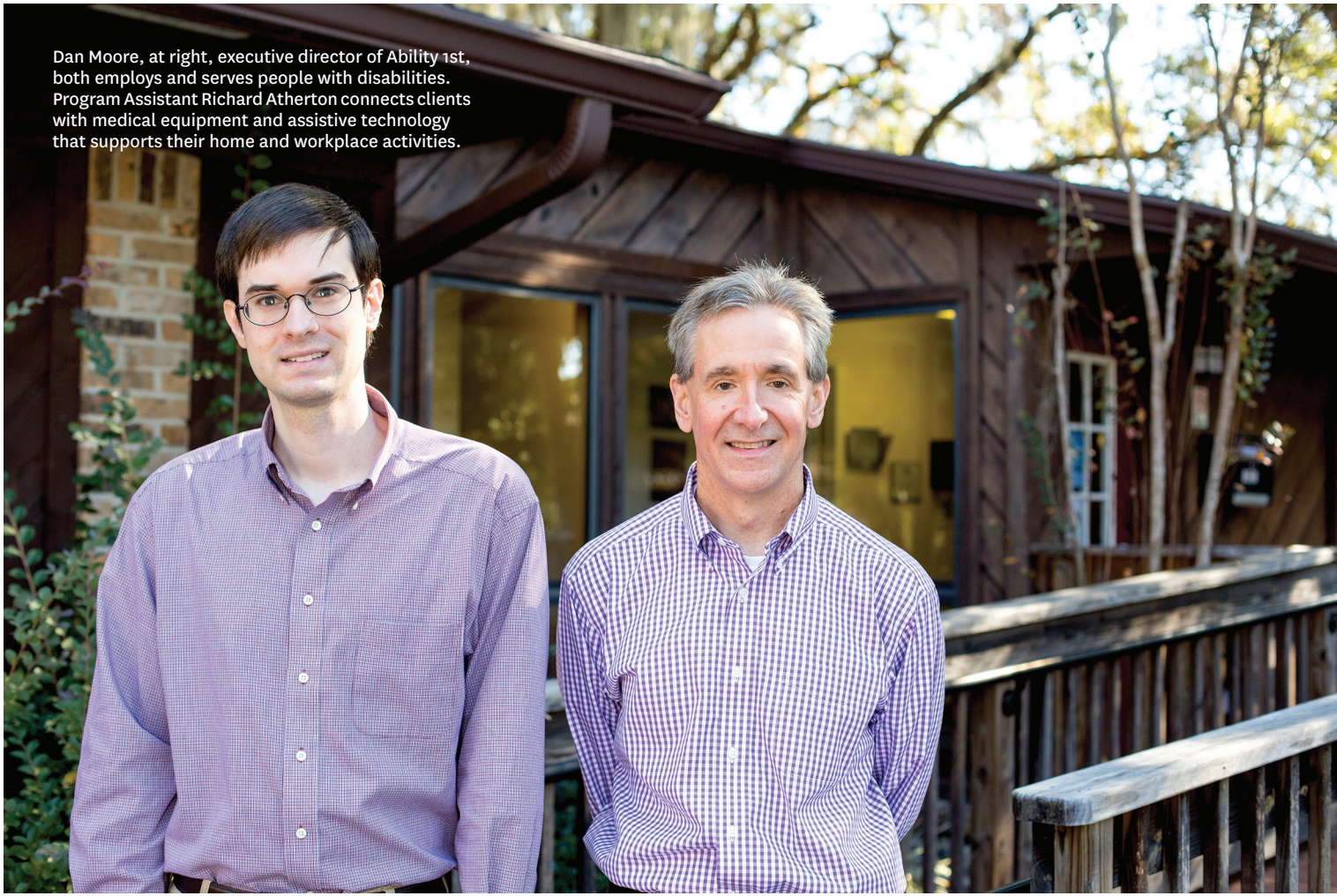


Dan Moore, at right, executive director of Ability 1st, both employs and serves people with disabilities. Program Assistant Richard Atherton connects clients with medical equipment and assistive technology that supports their home and workplace activities.



PUTTING SPECIAL ABILITIES TO WORK

Employees with disabilities prove assumptions wrong *by* **TISHA CREWS KELLER**

By nearly every measure, Dan Moore has found the key to hiring employees that exceed expectations. Compared to the norm, his staff surpasses longevity records, has an incredible work ethic, and is more fully invested in their jobs.

The secret to his success? Fifty percent or more of his staff are persons living with disabilities.

“I get better employees and fewer HR problems with employees with disabilities,” he says proudly.

He’s onto something big. According to longstanding research, the benefits of hiring persons with disabilities are really the intangibles: superior work ethic, loyalty and all-around great employees.

For many business owners and managers, though, the prospect of hiring someone who needs accommodations is intimidating — and not just for the real costs of building codes and access ramps.

According to Dr. J.R. Harding, an instructional specialist at Florida State University’s College of Business, employers

typically harbor pre-conceived biases toward those with disabilities. Mainly, these are centered around health insurance rates, infrastructure improvement costs and cultural issues. Typically, employers believe they will experience higher employee-related costs, more absenteeism and higher insurance premiums if they employ individuals with disabilities. But in reality, these concerns aren’t borne out.

Harding points out that research indicates employees with disabilities generally work harder, stay in jobs longer, have no

PHOTOS BY JOHNSTON ROBERTS

performance differences and help cultivate a better workplace culture overall.

“When you’re finally getting a chance and you’ve experienced discrimination all your life,” Moore explains, “you can be so grateful.”

Moore says it’s this gratitude that makes his staff such wonderful employees. As the executive director for Ability 1st in Tallahassee, 50 percent of his staff has some sort of disability, whether physical, emotional or intellectual. For him, it’s all about giving someone a chance to excel at what they can do, and matching the right person to the right job.

For most people with disabilities, just getting an interview is the biggest hurdle they face. And there is a huge difference in the types of jobs for which they are considered good candidates.

“There’s two kinds of ‘hiring those with disabilities,’” Moore points out. “The first is hiring for entry-level positions,” which several local companies do pretty well.

“But in terms of choosing a professional with a disability, there’s a lot of discrimination there,” he says.

Florida State University and the State of Florida tend to be the biggest local employers of professionals with disabilities in the Tallahassee area. However, only about 25 percent of differently-abled people who are college-educated are working in their field, and even those high-functioning people with disabilities still experience everyday discrimination.

Harding confirms this. In his view, there is a big gap between abilities and job placements in the professional world. These include attitudinal problems, programmatic inconsistencies and the lack of opportunities for people with disabilities to show their abilities to employers. Unfortunately, reports indicate that only about 30 percent of people with disabilities are in the workforce, compared with around 70 percent of the able-bodied.

In addition, different disabilities — such as emotional or physical — tend to get different opportunities from the business sector.

For instance, there can be a strong stigma against hiring someone with PTSD or some other emotional disability, whereas a person on the autism spectrum may be stereotyped as having a certain set of expected abilities like math or cognitive skills. But it’s never a good idea to generalize characteristics to people, and this is especially important when considering someone from an HR standpoint.

Ramps and wheelchairs can empower people with certain disabilities to put their talents to work. Richard Atherton helps bridge gaps between disability and potential.

If you are a differently-abled person, “you shouldn’t have to be the best employee in the building to keep your job,” Moore says.

From an employer’s perspective, small accommodations can make the difference for successfully employing those with disabilities.

For instance, an employee using a mood stabilizer to stem the effects of traumatic brain injury may experience morning sluggishness. Flexible work schedules can solve that problem.

Professionals on the autism spectrum may have a hard time reading social cues, but education and training on etiquette, social and office rules, etc. can help them blend seamlessly with customers and co-workers alike.

For workers with emotional disabilities, low-traffic and quiet work areas that provide little external stimulation can be the key to a successful employee.



In much the same way, people with chronic pain, orthopedic issues or those using a power chair can be enabled by using standing desks, inexpensively raising a conventional desk a few inches higher off the floor and other simple modification investments.

To Moore, these common-sense changes to the work environment are how employers committed to equality — and to getting the absolute best employees on the payroll — are a low-cost solution with big social and productivity benefits.

Speaking to the concern that employees with disabilities will increase insurance costs, Moore points out that this simply isn't true.

"Someone with a chronic illness is gonna hit your insurance much harder than someone who has healed, is not in the acute phase of their disease, and has learned to live successfully with that disability," he explains. "Lifestyle choices that lead to chronic disease are much more risky (for employers) than visible or invisible disabilities" in terms of employer concerns.

Harding contributes to this culture shift by sharing his own story and through his teaching at FSU. He was injured in high school and has been wheelchair-bound since he was a teenager. Today, he teaches a management class at the FSU College of Business that focuses on ability inclusion. He also guest-lectures at several other academic programs in the university.

Dr. J.R. Harding, who teaches management in the FSU College of Business, says workplace investments that empower employees with disabilities pay off.

ADA Paves the Way

It's common to hear business owners gripe about the mandated ADA-compliance requirements for new building permits (the \$50,000 elevator that must be installed), or the seemingly over-priced retrofits required for any building improvements.

It's an unfortunate fact that many businesses use the "undue burden" clause to circumvent these legally mandated ADA access requirements. But "barrier removal" only begins with adding a handicapped parking space to the lot.

There are, of course, more expensive and in-depth provisions in the law. But in reality, we all benefit when elevators are made larger and sidewalks are made smoother. And for people living with disabilities, these accommodations counteract the everyday discrimination that extends far beyond job opportunities and into daily life.

From a business perspective, there are financial incentives to employing people with disabilities.

Often, community development block grants and small business incentives offer ways to pay for accessibility improvements, and there are certain tax credits available for hiring these employees.

From the Dark Ages to the Renaissance

Harding knows from experience that, as a whole, society has evolved pretty well from the days when people with disabilities were hidden and isolated from the world at large. But, there's a long way to go. In terms of higher education, faculty members' actions, awareness and initiative to make equal-access accommodations for students with disabilities is much higher than it used to be.

And, even from the K-12 perspective, students with disabilities are used to being mainstreamed (integrated with regular classes and not segregated into "special ed")



PHOTO BY STEVE BORNHOFT