



## Building Disability-Friendly Careers in Manufacturing

### Overview

The Manufacturing Institute hosted a Solution Series event exploring how manufacturers can create truly disability-friendly careers in their organization.

This session featured:

- **Beth Sirull**, CEO of the National Organization on Disability, who has lived with non-apparent disabilities throughout her life and cares for people with disabilities.
- **Michelle Barnhart**, HR Manager at The Timken Company, a wheelchair user who has centered her professional work on opening those doors for others with disabilities.

### The Business Case for Disability Inclusion

Individuals with disabilities represent a large, yet underutilized talent pool.

- More than 1 in 4 Americans have some type of disability ([CDC](#))
- People with disabilities are twice as likely to be unemployed as those without a disability ([DOL](#)).

Facing persistent workforce shortages, manufacturers are well-positioned to welcome and support individuals with disabilities.

- The industry faces a shortage of 3.8 million workers by 2033, with 1.9 million jobs projected to go unfilled (The MI and Deloitte).

Accommodations made for employees with disabilities frequently benefit entire workforces, leading to higher retention. At Timken, a lift-assist device introduced as an accommodation became standard equipment on the floor, reducing strain for all workers.

- 94% of workplace accommodations cost nothing or a low, one-time expense to implement ([Job Accommodation Network](#)).

### Equipping Frontline Leaders

Building disability-friendly careers starts with having a trained frontline leadership. Barnhart highlighted three components that determine whether leaders follow through with building disability-friendly careers:

- **Competency.** Are managers trained on ADA requirements and accommodation processes? Is that training happening often enough to stay current? Most managers learn what they *can't* do, but the more useful training focuses on what they *can* do to support their teams.
- **Autonomy.** Frontline leaders need the authority to say yes to implementing small accommodations. If every accommodation decision requires multiple layers of approval, momentum stalls and "no" becomes the path of least resistance.
- **Organizational relatedness.** Leaders are more likely to find solutions when they feel that leadership genuinely wants them to. Leadership involvement in employee resource groups like Timken's **Celebrating Abilities Network (CAN)**, an employee resource group that raises awareness for people with disabilities and caregivers across the organization, has been critical to its success.

## Steps to Help Employees with Disabilities Succeed

**Start with capability, not limitation.** From the interview, employers should ask individuals what they need to do a job well rather than assuming that they can't do it at all.

**Review job descriptions for accuracy,** honestly assessing what qualities are required and which are nice to have. Sirull noted that certain physical requirements like "must lift 50 lbs." may not be critical with lift-assist accommodations.

**Leader with empathetic curiosity.** When an employee's output changes, Sirull recommended that managers express what they've observed — not make assumptions. A simple "I've noticed this; help me understand what would help you do your job well" opens a productive conversation without crossing legal lines around health conditions.

## Continue Investing in Your Workforce

The National Organization on Disability's EnAble Learning offers on-demand training focused on disability inclusion, mental health, neurodiversity, accessibility, and emerging technology. [Learn more and get started.](#)

Want more solutions? Join us at the MI's [2026 Workforce Summit](#) in Indianapolis, Indiana, October 26–28! This year's Summit features an exciting and robust agenda focused on the strategies helping manufacturers compete and grow. [Learn more and register today.](#)

- [Check out the Solutions Center](#) to learn more about Solution Series and see future events when announced.