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Reverse job fair gives those with disabilities a chance to promote themselves

By Katherine Knott | July 12, 2016

Paul Studebaker was nervous before the start of Johnson County's first reverse job fair.

He set up his booth, complete with a trifold board and copies of his resume. At this different kind of job fair, held Tuesday in Olathe, the employers would come to Studebaker rather than job seekers going from booth to booth, so he wanted his board to stand out.

He had a medal from the Special Olympics. Studebaker bowls and plays basketball and baseball. A license plate for the Shawnee Mission South Raiders is a nod to his alma mater. Studebaker has worked in a handful of jobs, mostly in food service. His dream job is to work with children.

The fair was put on by several Johnson County agencies, including Johnson County Developmental Supports, the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Corrections and the Department of Human Resources. Around 25 job seekers attended. Employers would walk around the conference room, stopping to chat with or interview the job seekers.

"The whole aim is to find opportunities for people with disabilities," said David Hanson of Johnson County Mental Health.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 17.5 percent of people with a disability were employed in 2015. In contrast, 65 percent of people without a disability were employed.

"Not only do I believe that this is the right thing for us, as employers, to be doing. But I also think this is a smart thing to be doing," said Maury Thompson, the assistant county manager for Johnson County. Thompson spoke on a panel that accompanied the job fair. The panel was aimed at employers looking to hire people with disabilities.

Thompson said people with disabilities "want nothing more than to be given an opportunity to show up, to show their worth and be able to be a productive member of the community."

The government agencies behind the fair provide services to help people secure employment. They might offer job training, resume building or supplemental skills. County employees also helped the job seekers build their boards and make business cards.

Beth Johnson from Johnson County Developmental Supports said the idea for the fair came from one of her employees. JCDS helps Johnson County residents with intellectual and developmental disabilities find employment, among their other services.

Tyler Smith found a job through an internship program at Developmental Supports. Project Search, the internship program, has been around for three years. Interns do job rotations at area employers over a nine-month period and then they graduate from the program. Smith said Project Search taught him practical skills.

He's now an usher at an AMC theater.

"For me, when I have a job, it means that I'm responsible for myself and that I'm an adult," Smith said. "I'm learning all this stuff outside in the real world."

By law, employers can't ask if a person has a disability. They can ask if the person needs accommodations. JCDS provides support to both the job seeker and the employer by, among other things, helping with on-site training.

Stephanie Adger, a recruiter with FedEx, attended the job fair to find out what kind of accommodations people would need.

Thompson, the assistant county manager, said that in his experience, the accommodations are minor.

Elizabeth Gibson, the director of human resources for Mid America Rehabilitation Hospital, has worked with several Project Search interns.

"I take it as an opportunity to teach my own staff to work with those who have disabilities and let them know that they are like everybody else and we treat them like every other employee," Gibson said.

She said that one stigma associated with hiring people with disabilities is that they can't do the job, but that's not the case.

"They totally have the skill set to do it; it's just teaching everybody to be open-minded," she said.