



Training Workers with Disabilities and Educating Employers: Moji Coffee + More

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Five years ago, a group of parents in Winston-Salem, North Carolina created Moji Coffee + More out of a desire to create meaningful employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Now this June, Moji celebrates its fifth anniversary and its evolution from a simple coffee shop into a catalyst of change for employees and businesses alike.

Nearly four out of every five people with disabilities in the U.S. are either unemployed or underemployed, points out Moji's Executive Director Anna Donze. Moji has embraced a mission of providing job and life skills training to people with differing abilities so that they can find and retain meaningful employment, while educating employers on fostering inclusive workplaces. Donze highlights Moji's language shift from "people with disabilities" to "differing abilities," emphasizing that each employee has the ability to work and contribute as much as anyone.

"Our hope is that each individual, after one to three years, will be in a place where they've built their confidence, developed a wide array of transferable skills, and know what kind of long-term work environment they'd like to be in," she says. "Every shift, we're working with our staff to provide skills not just with their performance at Moji in mind, but their future and their goals."

Taking Ownership and Gaining Work and Life Skills

That transferable knowledge includes not only professional skills such as customer service, safe food handling, and financial transactions, but habits that benefit each Moji barista – or "mojista," as they're known – in both their professional and personal lives.

For example, Moji emphasizes from the start of each mojista's employment that they are responsible for their schedule, transportation to and from work, and communicating with staff if they'll be late, need to make a change to their schedule, or have another issue. Donze says the goal is to empower each employee to not have to rely on parents or caregivers to handle those kinds of communications with their place of work.



“We want to make sure that they’re taking the lead on those conversations, just so that they have the habit of responsible communication,” she says. “Instead of caregivers or parents letting us know, we want to make sure that they know, ‘You can tell me that.’”

Communication lessons are part of the workday with fellow employees, too. With a staff of different ages and backgrounds, Moji impresses upon each employee what could be a “green light” conversation to have with a co-worker, a “yellow light” talk that would need them to ask their co-worker if it’s OK to discuss, and “red light” conversation that wouldn’t be appropriate for the workplace.

These skills aren’t only taught by Moji’s leadership team, but by former mojistas who become coaches to newer employees. The team prioritizes internal promotion; three out of the five coaches on staff were previously mojistas themselves who, over time, demonstrated an aptitude for teaching and helping their peers. Coaches fill out quick evaluations at the end of each shift, and at the monthly coaches meeting, approaches to training are adjusted to best work for each individual mojista.

Coaching on Benefits and Finances

Maintaining benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance is a concern for people with disabilities who want to work. Many of Moji’s staff receive benefits of some sort and their job at the coffee shop is the first time they’ve received additional income.

Moji and its coaches work with each employee and their parents or guardians on how their paycheck may affect their benefits. For instance, as SSI disregards the first \$20 of monthly earnings, an additional \$65 for earned income, and then counts only 50 cents on the dollar thereafter. Individuals can still maintain their benefits while earning income within SSI limits.

“We want to make sure that nobody is taken by surprise,” Donze said.

Beyond benefits, Moji’s coaches also help each employee understand how to handle their paycheck: how direct deposit works, how to cash a check if they’re paid that way, and how to make sure to use money appropriately.

From taking care of their uniforms or aprons, to attendance and punctuality, Moji emphasizes personal responsibility not to be punitive, but to highlight for each employee



the importance of taking these aspects of work seriously – especially since their next job may not have as much flexibility as the coffee shop.

Educating and Empowering Employers

Moji is working on employers' flexibility, too. In the past year, Moji began offering a series of Employer Empowerment Workshops to businesses actively seeking to hire people with different abilities or want to make changes to their current hiring practices and work environments to be an inclusive and adaptive employer.

“Inclusive tech changes for employers are much less daunting and expensive than folks get in their head,” Donze says.

These can include simple adjustments like making sure that the online application is accessible, available in different languages, the ability to submit applications handwritten or typed, and offering different options for interviews, whether on the phone, in person, or over a video call. Some of the barriers are well known to any job seeker – such as uploading a created resume but then having to type out all the information in the resume into another online form.

“It’s not a one-size-fits-all process that works for that application phase,” Donze says.

“Anyone who’s been on the job market can get burnt out quickly with online applications and going through the motions with so many to not get a response.”

Smaller and local employees can offer in-person opportunities without a paper application before an interview, Donze says. And job descriptions shouldn’t be immutable, she adds. Sometimes a single bullet point in a job description can discourage someone from applying, even when everything else seems like a great fit.

“You can make a one line adjustment for a person and suddenly they’re completely qualified for the role, and the world isn’t going to end,” Donze says. “I can understand simplifying the process for HR and all of that just to keep things moving, but you miss out on a lot of great opportunities and employees, new perspectives and innovative ideas because of one bullet point on the application.”

Employees also receive assistance with job search needs, from helping with searches and creating resumes, to practicing interviews, to even helping them with their orientation at a new job.



“After graduation from Moji, we’re still on call to help if they want to have a conversation with a supervisor or they’re having scheduling issues that they’re not sure how to handle,” Donze says. “We also make sure that we’re able to help the employer in ways they can support their employees.”

Celebrating 5 Years of Empowerment

As Moji Coffee + More continues to write its story of empowerment and inclusivity, it serves as a beacon of hope for people with disabilities and a model for businesses aspiring to embrace diversity. With each cup of coffee served and every workshop conducted, Moji reinforces the belief that every person deserves the chance to thrive. Here’s to five years of transformation and the countless lives touched by the power of inclusion.

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