

Making connections in technology

*Goodwill program helps people
with disabilities find a job*

By STACY TORNIO - Freeman Staff

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NEW BERLIN - John Dziewa knows the importance of networking.

"You look back at the opportunity that one little connection provided and it's amazing," Dziewa said.

In 1988 Dziewa signed up for a pilot program at Goodwill Industries designed to help people with disabilities get a job in the technology field. A 1985 accident during high school left him paraplegic, and he didn't know how to re-enter the work force.

"After I graduated, I sat around and didn't know what to do," Dziewa said. "To start a new job out of high school is hard enough as it is. It was really difficult for me to do it with a disability."

A friend of the family saw information about the Goodwill opportunity in the newspaper and told Dziewa's family. He entered a nine-month training program and was then placed in an internship at Fiserv, a Brookfield company. Before his internship was up, Dziewa was hired for a full-time position.

The program Dziewa participated in is now called AbillTy Connection, and it has been in its current form since 1996. The letters I and T are capitalized in the name to highlight the field of information technology.



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John Dziewa works at his desk at Fiserv in Brookfield. He started working at the company after completing a training program at Goodwill Industries.

Though AbillTy Connection is no longer a training program, it still provide students in southeastern Wisconsin with the opportunity to connect with professionals in the technology field. The opportunities are available through internships and mentoring, and the students participating in the program come from a wide range of backgrounds.

For example, Kristie Casper is an adult student from Waukesha. She recently completed an internship at the American Cancer Society in City of Pewaukee through AbillTy Connection. She has a back injury and qualified for the program through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Casper is still looking for a permanent position, but she knows her experience at the American Cancer Society will help her *řsumř* get noticed. Brandi Mahurin is the help desk coordinator at the American Cancer Society, and she supervised Casper's internship.

"She was a great intern and was prepared to learn," Mahurin said. "She was one of those people who really put her heart into it."

Mahurin was impressed with AbillTy Connection and is now trying to find a second intern through the program.

Janice Innocenzi is the coordinator for AbillTy Connection. She said they are always looking for new businesses to work with.

"The ultimate goal is to get everyone placed, which means to get them a job," Innocenzi said. "They get contacts and do networking, and obviously that comes in handy when looking for a job."

Dziewa admits it can be mentally difficult for someone with a disability to re-enter the work force. He now works as a mentor for AbillTy Connection to help others make the transition.

"Because I put so much value in what I got out of the program, I now try to give back in whatever way I can," he said.

It took Dziewa some time to adjust to his workplace, but now, 16 years later, he is glad he took the time.

"I always said my own personal fears of getting back into the workplace paralyzed me more than the disability itself," he said.

The AbillTy Connection is open to new student and business participants. For more information about the program, call Janice Innocenzi at (414) 353-6400, Ext. 281.

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