

USU Connects Local Businesses and Clients with Disabilities | CEHS

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It's the paycheck that Ryan loves talking about the most.

Normally, wages are not a conversational topic in the workplace, but no one in this office seems to mind. For Ryan, the paystub is a source of pride—evidence that he is contributing.

Ryan Dickey, along with his sister Sarah Dickey, were hired this fall to work at Malouf Sleep, an international bedding supply company headquartered in Cache Valley.

More than 120 employees work at the large office building, but Ryan and Sarah are notable because they are the first clients to be hired through Utah State University's employability clinic.

The clinic receives clients from the state-funded Division of Services for People with Disabilities (DSPD) and works with them to find jobs in the community. They shifted focus in July to begin utilizing a "customized employment" process.

That process has already begun paying off for Ryan and Sarah.

Ryan Paskins, who serves as the director of the Employability Clinic, accompanied the siblings on a tour of the facilities at Malouf and was impressed with what he saw. "Malouf is very connected in the community and supportive of their employees," Paskins said. "It was a really neat atmosphere."

Following the tour, Malouf didn't wait long to jump on the opportunity to bring Ryan and Sarah on board. "Before we were able to approach them to explore options, they contacted us and said, 'What would it take for us to hire some of your clients?'" Paskins said.

"They came in and it was a really light, happy feeling," said Jake Neeley, a marketing manager at Malouf. "Immediately after their tour, we decided to see if we could work something out."

The relationship has been mutually beneficial.

"We recognized how happy they are and how they brought this excited feeling to the office," Neeley said. "Every single person they talked to just smiled. They brightened everyone's day."

The siblings work on alternating days of the week, spending a few hours cleaning the cafeteria and the break room, caring for the live plants around the office, and visiting with other employees. "They look like they've worked in restaurants because they are so thorough," said Kenzi Falslev, whose spot at the reception desk means she is often the first to see Ryan or Sarah when they arrive. "It's so cool because they'll come in and they'll be so independent. They'll say 'I've got this, take my coat.'"

Even in just a few months of work, it's evident that Ryan and Sarah are developing skills, Falslev said. "They've become independent and have really shown that they're capable of doing things," Falslev said. "They just do things in a different way."

Finding jobs that match the clients' talents and helping them to develop a skill set is the goal of the Employability Clinic. When clients come in, they sit down with Paskins or one of the other employees who work there and go through a skills assessment.

"We do an intensive assessment process individualized to them, and we identify their interests, abilities and skill level," Paskins said. The assessment gives Paskins a good idea of the situations for which the client would be a good fit.

"This whole assessment process is a very strength-based process," Paskins said. "We focus on what they can do rather than what they cannot do." Clinic workers then visit with businesses in the community, like Malouf, to gauge interest and find potential employment opportunities for clients.

"We find a situation that's a good fit for them and for the employer so that it will be a win-win on both sides," Paskins said. As talks progress, Paskins sets up a time when he and the client can tour the business. The walkthrough gives the client and the company the opportunity to get to know each other. "That way, they can meet and just see if they're a good fit," Paskins said. "A lot of people don't have experience with a person with a disability, so these meetings help knock down potential misconceptions."

"They often say, 'Oh this is someone who is happy and nice and friendly, and I can work with them and they can work with me'," Paskins said.

If the company is interested in hiring a client, Paskins works with them to find a position of need in the business that fits the skills and interests of the individual. A client who has a culinary interest, for example, might work in a bakery, or an individual who is good with animals could work in a pet store. Paskins considers it a win-win because the client can find meaningful employment and the business gets a stable worker who is excited about the job.

The Employability Clinic is currently working with four clients, including Ryan and Sarah, and Paskins hopes to develop working relationships with other local businesses in the near future.