

SHELF CONFIDENCE

Season 6, Episode 3: Supporting a Neurodiverse Workforce with Dave Simonetti of Wawa

[Intro] Hello and welcome to Shelf Confidence, a podcast brought to you by the Pennsylvania Food Merchants Association that focuses on trends and innovation in the food and beverage industry. I'm Larissa Newton, your host, and today I'm happy to welcome Dave Simonetti, senior director of store operations and business operations support at Wawa and also a PFMA board member.

As part of his role, Dave leads Wawa's Supported Employment Program, which employs individuals with intellectual disabilities throughout the chain. He was integral in partnering with the Eagles Autism Foundation to open a production facility for Popcorn for the People in a former Wawa store on South Street in Philadelphia. The facility hires and trains adults with neurodiverse backgrounds to cook, prepare and package popcorn that is sold throughout southeastern Pennsylvania.

[Larissa] Alright, well, thank you so much, Dave, for joining us today.

[Dave] Thank you for having me. This is a great topic and something that I love to share when I get the chance.

[Larissa] So can you start by giving us an overview of Wawa's Supported Employment Program and how it originated?

[Dave] So Wawa has had a Supported Employment Program for over 43 years now. It actually started organically, like a lot of things do at Wawa. We had a store next to the Eden Center for Autism in New Jersey and had built a relationship with the school. And at a certain point, the general manager of the store felt like, hey, we can probably bring some folks in and give them job opportunities here in our store. And that relationship was born. The associates who we hired are still working for us. And, so there's a lot of longevity in the program, as well, in terms of people taking these jobs at Wawa and really thriving with them.

So, but it did start organically. It's something that we've definitely added a lot of, you know,

parameters and process to over the years. But I think one of the messages I'll talk about today is: If you've got a big heart and you've got patience and you've got the desire to do this, you can make it work.

[Larissa] And so what were some of the challenges you faced over the years in implementing and running the program?

[Dave] So I think about 10 years ago, we really took a good look at the program, and we had a lot of inconsistency in terms of how people were onboarded, the types of roles we were giving them, how we were supporting them through their work process. And I think what most of it came down to is: There's a lot of things in the disability space that you have to be an expert in, and our folks are not the experts in the disability space. So the biggest challenges are typically change management for the individuals with the intellectual disability and, you know, just communication and structure.

So what we've done over the last 10 years or so, we've really solidified our relationship with job coaching organizations who bridge the gap for us between what we know about disability — which is very little — and what they know — which is expertise. And then making that connection between us, the associate, the caretakers, the guardians to make that whole relationship work. And then really formalizing some structural things around schedules and things like that, that allowed for various standard workweeks for these folks who oftentimes have transportation requirements provided by the state. Or just like I said, change management is a big issue. You know, if somebody's schedule fluctuates. For a normal retail employee, that's kind of par for the course. But in these cases, it can be incredibly disruptive if you're changing their schedules around a lot.

[Larissa] And so how do you ensure that the work environment is inclusive and supportive for the employees with intellectual disabilities?

[Dave] So I think for us, a big part of our culture is inclusivity. So when we have an associate coming in who has an intellectual disability, first off, they're coming in with a job coach, the job coach is there to help with the training, to help with the acclimation. But at the same time, it's not as challenging as you might think.

These are folks who, like all of our associates, they want to contribute. They want to be part of something. They, you know, want to be around other associates. They want to be around a customer. So that kind of natural gravity takes place. And we really haven't seen inclusivity being the issue. I think a lot of people, once they get the exposure, and maybe they don't know a lot about someone with, you know, Down syndrome. They don't know a lot about autism or some of the other intellectual disabilities that some of our associates are working through. But once they get to know people and kind of see that, I think the bonds that you get of co-workers and in, you know, close environment form pretty natural-

ly. So, I think you don't have to do a lot of special, you know, diversity training or neurodiversity training to make this work.

[Larissa] That's great! So are there any specific roles or tasks that these employees are particularly suited for, or are they kind of integrated into all aspects of store operations?

[Dave] So, I think the cool thing about intellectual disabilities is when you hear about a spectrum, it is truly a spectrum of ability. And I think what we do at Wawa that makes this work is, you know, we take fairly complex roles — you know, our store associates have to handle cleaning, food prep, customer service — but we try and narrow down the jobs in our supported program to the best fit for the individual.

We absolutely have folks who come in and maybe focus on one or two tasks and that's that's as complex as their job is going to be, for the most part. We have others who come in and are able to take on almost all of the typical associate tasks. And what we try and do working with the job coaches is find tasks that work really well with their skill sets and carve out a portion of the work that has to be done in the store anyways and say that, you know, this is what so-and-so is going to work on and then kind of have that structure. And occasionally we can add tasks and things like that. They get more proficient. Maybe they want to try to take on a different part. You know, they want to learn how to make beverages or, you know, maybe they really just like being in the cold box. It's quiet, it's peaceful, and it's super organized and structured.

So, the cool thing is we can take any parts of the job together and form —again, stuff that has to be done anyways — and make it into a job for that individual.

[Larissa] And from a business standpoint, what benefits have you observed since starting the program?

[Dave] So I think the benefits, they're immeasurable.

First off, when you think about yourself, as in, you know, a business has a place in the community. Obviously we're there to sell things, but we're there... Wawa believes we're there to provide for the people in the community, 24/7/365, and we want to represent the community. We want to support the community. They're supporting us.

These are individuals who live in the community. A lot of times people know them or they get to know them. Usually, in my experience, super proud to have a job and contribute and to be out there in the community, you know, working with the customers. Our customers know them. Our associates, I think, like having folks who are neurodiverse on the team. It just adds another dimension. Like I said, the level of enthusiasm they bring is immeasurable.

And I think we get paid back in a lot of different ways. And, you know, it's not necessarily monetarily, but our customers see it, they see that we're supporting these folks that they know, and, you know, they really do become a loved part of the team.

[Larissa] Have there been any unexpected outcomes, positive or negative, that you'd like to share?

[Dave] I mean, there's always a risk of people not understanding. So I think the job coaches and the other associates in the store sometimes have to bridge that gap. Customers may not know somebody has an intellectual disability just by looking at them. So sometimes there's extra patience and grace needed, you know, on the sales floor or in other situations.

So there are occasionally things that come up that you have to work through. I think once things are communicated and people understand, we've always kind of been able to find good solutions to those.

The positives, like I said, we have associates in our stores who've been there over 40 years. We have associates that have been there for, you know, the 10 years. Incredible. And people come in just to see, you know, Mary, who might be on the coffee bar every day, just making sure things are perfect for them. And so I think those moments are a big part of why we do it, too.

You know, those connections between our associates and our customers are really important to us. And then this subset of our associates, I think, oftentimes I'll see them make even more amazing connections with our customers.

[Larissa] So Wawa actually worked with the Eagles Autism Foundation to open a production facility for Popcorn for the People. Can you talk a little bit about how that partnership came about and what it has meant for the company?

[Dave] Absolutely. So, you know, over the past couple of years, it's no secret, Wawa, we've closed a couple of our stores in Philadelphia. And I think as we've went through that process, which is not a process that's been fun for us — we've made big investments and it's a home for our associates — and it's always a hard decision to have to close the store. One of the things we wanted to try and do was find an opportunity to repurpose one of those stores and continue to give to the community and support the communities we were in.

And as we were working through different potential options, we've had a long relationship with the Eagles Autism Challenge and the Philadelphia Eagles. And when we were in some talks with them, they had been working with this company called Popcorn for the People, which they were selling in the Eagles stadium. And that group was selling online. And Popcorn for the People was a group of parents who came together to create opportunities for their children who had autism who were struggling to find other opportunities.

And as we looked at what Popcorn did and we looked at our facilities, we felt like there was a really good match up and an opportunity to give them the second facility that they desperately needed to handle their growing capacity, create 40 plus more jobs for neurodiverse individuals, and put them pretty close proximity to the Eagles stadium, which is one of their biggest customers and sales opportunities.

And from my perspective — and I've been working in the Supported Employment space since I came into Wawa about 10 years ago — there's far more folks that need employment than Wawa is able to provide for. There's really more folks — it's almost a 60 percent unemployment rate for neurodiverse individuals — and we needed to talk to other businesses, create other opportunities. No one business can fill that gap. So this was a chance for us to support another business who's hiring in this same space, with a great product, with a great story, partnering with one of our best partners, to do something special, one of our closed stores and kind of bring some life back to South Street.

So it came together on so many fronts. And it was really exciting for me that I could get to work on that. And then for Wawa, I think everybody I came to on the project, whether it was our construction team or our design team, they all just like jumped in really enthusiastically because everybody, I think, was pretty passionate that this was a great project.

[Larissa] Yeah. So what are your future plans for this program? Are there any goals or expansions in mind?

[Dave] So the program itself, we've got a pretty structured look at it. We're going to be moving to new markets with Wawa. So we're going into the Midwest. We're expanding in the South. We intend to expand the program as we grow, and we typically let things kind of grow organically. I think we're going to be a little more intentional about opening up our stores in Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, areas like that, and having Supported Employment be a part of the store openings much sooner in the process. So we're finding some partners in those areas to help us along. So that's one way we're being more intentional.

The other way, as I mentioned, kind of like the Popcorn for People example, we are working with any businesses that are interested in hiring in this space. And we are absolutely an open book. We'll share everything we know about running this program. And I think it's a lot less complicated and a lot less complex and scary once you once you learn about it than people think. And we would be happy to help anybody who wants to get a pilot program started.

And, you know, just helping others in an area where, like I said, Wawa, I think we're doing a nice job. We've got a little over 600 employees. We plan on growing that, but the need is so much greater.

[Larissa] And so for those businesses who are considering a similar initiative, what kind of advice would you give them?

[Dave] So I think flexibility, number one, is the biggest priority. You think about your opportunities for employment and you think about what your typical associates do. It may be some or all of or even a small part of some of the jobs, but I think as you break it down, there are absolutely tasks that will make sense. And you hire the person in this space. Make sure that you have a resource like a job-coaching agency. We've got a long history with a lot of job-coaching agencies in the various states we operate in, but they're there in every community. And be open to hiring the individual and then figuring out the work that is going to make sense for them.

So it's a little bit of a different thought than when you would hire a typical individual where you think of the work, and then you try to fit the individual to the work. Here, you hire the individual and then you absolutely have the work that'll fit for this individual. You just have to approach it from a different direction.

[Larissa] So before we wrap up, do you have any other thoughts or comments you'd like to share with our audience?

[Dave] You know, I think for me this has always been a little bit personal. I have a daughter who has Down syndrome. She's 12 years old. One day I want her to have opportunities to have fulfilling and meaningful work, some place that she can go during the week and she feels like she's part of a team and that the things she does matters.

And as this community, disability community that that I'm a part of — it's kind of an expanding community, there's millions and millions of Americans with intellectual disabilities. There's a huge population here that's underserved that I think feel the same way. They want to contribute, want to be part of something. And as a business, you know, it's our job really to create a great work environment for our associates. That's how we create great opportunities to connect with our customers.

Don't overlook this portion of the population. Us and others are willing to help people who want to take this on. It's not as hard as you think. And you can really tap into a great part of the population that can help you grow and expand your business, your customer connections, and do something for somebody that really wants to contribute.

One of the cool things, that I'll kind of share, too, we don't see a lot of turnover in this population. During the pandemic, we had a lot of concerns because folks with intellectual disabilities have a higher level of physical disability and a higher risk level. So we offered anybody in this program the ability to step away and come back to their job when things calmed down, and almost nobody took that offer.

And our folks with intellectual disabilities in our Supported Employment Program came in. They wore gloves, they wore masks, they followed every protocol. They cared that much about their jobs. They were willing to take an additional risk over the general population because coming to the job for them was so meaningful, such a meaningful part of their week. So I think that to me just really highlights the specialness of this group.

And, you know, anytime you have that much passion to do something as a business, that's just incredible. You don't get that that often. So that's the kind of things I like to share with people when they're thinking about doing this.

[Larissa] That's incredible. I love that.

[Outro] If any of our members are interested in talking to Dave about Wawa's Supported Employment Program or how they can implement their own program, please reach out through the association at pfma@pfma.net

Thank you for tuning into Shelf Confidence. If you enjoyed today's episode, please subscribe, share, and review us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.. Until next time, I'm Larissa Newton, and this is Shelf Confidence.