

Portland business benefits from tax credit, receives great employees

Aug. 1, 2019 - Portland

When Kristen and Geoff Zephyrus relocated [Cognitive Surplus](#) to Portland a few years ago, they started looking for dependable employees to help their growing business.

Kristen had a friend whose son had a good experience in another state with an internship program for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In addition, Karl Stevens, warehouse manager for Cognitive Surplus, is legally blind and believes strongly in giving people with disabilities the opportunity to work in community employment.



"It was important to us to hire people of diverse abilities," Kristen said. "We want to empower people who might otherwise be overlooked by employers and give them an opportunity," Karl said. "It's not charity. It's a job and an opportunity to be a contributing member of the community."

They connected with Kia Swain with the [Youth Transition Program \(YTP\)](#). YTP is a collaborative partnership between Vocational Rehabilitation, Oregon Department of Education, and the University of Oregon. It is funded by Vocational Rehabilitation through grants to local school districts. The purpose of YTP is to prepare students with disabilities for employment or post-secondary education through pre-employment transition activities and supports.

Kia is a YTP Specialist who serves several Portland high schools. Kia went to Cognitive Surplus to learn what the business does. "I learn the employers needs so I can find a student who has the strengths and skills that fit," she said.

Cognitive Surplus's slogan is "Science Meets Design." The company designs and distributes housewares, stationary and lifestyle wares with science themes.

The owners told Kia they needed an employee who could handle the physical aspects of the job, and someone who wouldn't mind the repetitive nature of stocking and shipping products out of a warehouse. "When I learned more about their business, I knew Forrest would be perfect," Kia said.

Kia referred Forrest Gulbransen, who had just graduated from Benson High School. He recently celebrated one year on the job. Forrest, 20, works 32 hours per week packing orders and scanning merchandise. "The job is doing the same thing over and over again, and I like that," Forrest said. "I don't do well with change."

Karl said after many failures trying to find employees by advertising in classified services, he was thrilled to find a dependable employee. "Forest is extremely efficient, respectful and dedicated," Karl said. "I wish I had an army of people like him."



The owners of Cognitive Surplus decided to take advantage of the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit \(WOTC\)](#). WOTC is a federal tax credit available to employers for hiring individuals from certain targeted groups who have consistently faced significant barriers to employment. Employees referred by Vocational Rehabilitation are one of the groups allowed by WOTC.

"The reason any business hires anyone, whether or not they have a disability, is to find a motivated, dependable employee," said Keith Ozols, Interim Director of Vocational Rehabilitation. "WOTC provides an additional incentive to businesses looking to diversify their workforce."

In 2018, Oregon employers received 5.9 million in tax credits due to hiring people with a Vocational Rehabilitation referral. While it isn't the reason employers hire a person with a disability, the tax credit can make a difference for a business.

Kristen said the company has hired two additional employees through YTP.

Gami Jimenez, 19, works full-time doing quality control on merchandise and also stocking and tagging goods. Miriam Perez-Luna, 18, works 24 hours per week packing and shipping the company's t-shirts, which are screen-printed in-house.

"I was really worried because other places were noisy," Miriam said.

YTP Specialist Kia Swain thought Miriam would be a good employee because the atmosphere is calm and quiet at Cognitive Surplus. Kia said making the connection between employer and employee is finding out what each needs to be successful. Miriam, who previously had several jobs that didn't work out, now feels confident.

"Karl helped me so much," she said. "He was really specific, which worked for me. I feel very comfortable here."

[A photo slideshow at Cognitive Surplus is online.](#)