

HIRE CALLING

Above the Trees looks at leaders and industries outside the law. It lets you draw analogies to how you run your business, how you deal with your clients and how you face your own challenges.

This Company's Disabled Work Force Boosts Morale, Productivity and Profits

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BY 1993, THE TENSION WAS THICK between executives at Habitat International, a successful indoor-outdoor rug manufacturer in north Georgia, and coordinators at a state-run training center for people with developmental disabilities.

For more than five years, clients from the center had "worked" at Habitat, earning small sums for cutting, folding and boxing indoor-outdoor rug and golf products for retailers like Lowe's and Home Depot. Business was booming, thanks in part to the disabled clients, who often out-produced Habitat's full-time employees.

Therein lay the problem, says David Morris, who co-founded the business with his father, Saul, in 1981.

QUESTIONING AUTHORITY

MORRIS SAYS THE STATE WORKSHOP AUTHORITIES KEPT scolding him for not adhering to formal evaluations stipulating what a person with Down syndrome or mental retardation could do. They discouraged Morris and his managers from getting close to the clients. And they were unwilling to pay more than \$1 or \$2 an hour, an absurdly low amount, Morris felt, given the group's productivity and enthusiasm.

Morris finally decided to stop battling the state and do what he should have already done: hire the entire group outright. Not long after that, he walked into the plant and announced that all eight of the clients with disabilities would be on the payroll. Cheers filled the room.

"The day we told them—and I'll never forget this—that they were Habitat employees and they would get a Habitat [pay]check, production went up," Morris recalls. "And then we had no one stopping us from hiring more."

Today the work force numbers about 100 people, including homeless contract laborers; most have physical or mental disabilities, or both. In an 80,000-square-foot facility in Chattanooga, Tenn., (across the state line from the old plant) workers with cerebral palsy, autism, hearing impairments and other challenges manufacture more than 12,000 rugs a day. They also craft a line of steel yard art and provide labor-intensive contract serv-

ices for corporations like Maytag and General Electric.

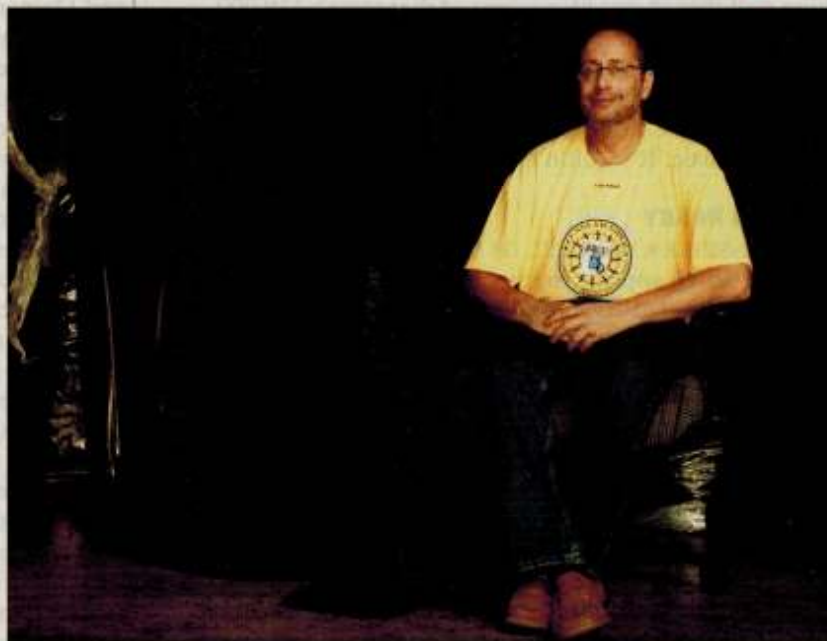
"In today's economy, we're looking to diversify and do things that other companies, whether they're manufacturers or warehouse operators or distributors, can't do as efficiently," Morris notes. "This gives us a whole new way of growing and accommodating a unique labor force that is out there waiting."

Habitat is unorthodox in other ways, too. Giant steel giraffes, ants and other critters greet visitors at the entrance gate, and the "living fence"—metal silhouettes of employees, some in wheelchairs—is impossible to miss. Inside, eclectic murals, sculptures and employee photo collages line the walls. Self-proclaimed disc jockeys take turns manning the in-house radio station.

Such wackiness boosts morale, Morris asserts, and also helps the employees bond like a family. "You feel something here, from the art and the music. Without art and creativity, you take away a lot of the human spirit."

The financial payoff for Habitat is undeniable. And "doing the right thing" has created good will among customers, inspired business owners and advocates, and cemented partnerships with former competitors.

"I haven't come across another manufacturing company that's willing to do the same thing David has," says Greg Sundell, executive director of Arkay Personnel Inc., a Taylor, Mich., nonprofit that finds jobs for people with disabilities. "When we think of a great employee, we think in terms of speed and accuracy," he says. "What makes a company grow is in fact not just speed and accuracy but also those other qualities: loyalty, enthusiasm and willingness to learn. Look at David's model. It works." ■



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