



WHITE PAPER

Close the warehouse labor gap with overlooked talent pools

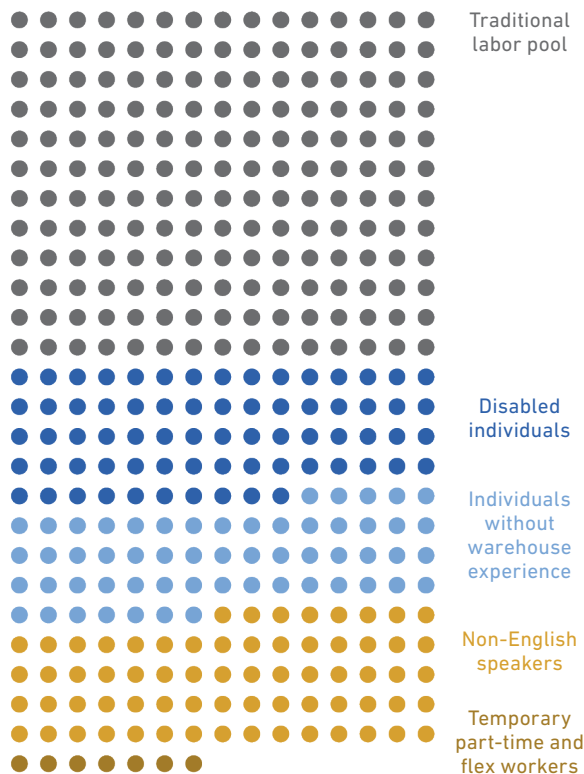
Even though the U.S. warehousing workforce has more than doubled between 2015 and 2025 to 1.8 million, the labor gap is expected to continue growing with the U.S. deficit expanding by an additional 6 million workers by 2032.

In response, warehouses are bolstering their employee retention efforts and some businesses are also turning to automation to keep pace with expanding operational needs. But when it comes to adding new employees, open positions outpace available labor, at least among the pool of mainstream candidates that warehouses typically source from.

However, the warehouse labor pool is deeper than it initially appears. By tapping into often overlooked and underutilized populations, operations can take a big step toward not only bridging the gap but also improving retention and productivity.

Opportunities to expand the labor pool

While it is important to recognize that not all approaches will be universally applicable across all warehouse environments, there are some largely untapped groups that can help to fill the warehouse labor gap.



**Each dot represents 10 million workers*

● DISABLED INDIVIDUALS

Sources vary as to the percentage of the U.S. population that is disabled. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) puts the number at around 13% in 2024, but, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates are considerably higher. Their data shows that 28% of adults in the U.S., or more than one in four, have some type of disability. In either case, there is a sizeable portion of the population that falls into this group. Generally, when people hear the term “disability,” what comes to mind are physically disabled individuals such as a wheelchair user, someone with a prosthetic or someone who has Down Syndrome. But that only represents a fraction of the disabled population. It is important to keep in mind that many people with disabilities have a disability that is not visually apparent, such as mental illness or impairments to cognition, speech, vision and hearing. According to some estimates, up to 80% of disabled individuals live with an invisible disability.

Despite the size of the disabled population, just 22.7% are employed, compared to 65.5% of those without disabilities. Although some disabilities might preclude people from working, many people with disabilities are not only capable of working but eager to do so and would potentially thrive in a warehouse environment. For example, some autistic people tend to thrive in structured environments with repetitive tasks — something that is found in abundance in most warehouses. Similarly, workers with physical disabilities may be strong candidates to supervise automation.

● INDIVIDUALS WITHOUT WAREHOUSE EXPERIENCE

Some warehouses will not consider candidates who do not have prior work experience in distribution centers or other warehousing environments, or a certain minimum amount of experience. Such requirements may exclude newer entrants to the labor pool who could be very effective workers given the opportunity and proper training. It may also overlook relevant, transferrable skills that an individual may have gained in work experiences outside of the warehousing industry. Workers from other popular industries like retail, food service, construction, trucking or delivery services, landscaping and manufacturing may bring with them many qualities that are not only applicable but highly valuable in warehousing. For example, many of these prior roles involve physical stamina and being on their feet for long hours; time management, adaptability and efficiency in fast-paced settings; reliability and punctuality in roles that are highly dependent on coordinated schedules; and basic technical skills or

familiarity with safety procedures in work that involves tools and other equipment. Internship or apprentice programs can cultivate pathways for inexperienced workers to build the job-specific skills they do not yet possess and provide employers with an additional source for their talent pipeline to help secure a steady stream of labor.

● NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS

While falling labor participation rates and an aging population are driving a worsening U.S. workforce shortage, some segments of the population are helping to curb how quickly the deficit expands. Data from the [Congressional Budget Office](#) estimates that “the labor force in 2033 will be larger by 5.2 million people, mostly because of higher net immigration.” While many warehouse positions in the U.S. do not require employees to be English speakers, English proficiency is sometimes a job requirement or preferred skill. Warehouses in need of a larger potential labor pool may benefit from carefully evaluating the necessity of English language skills for success in the positions for which they are hiring and offering language support or training to non-English speakers.



● TEMPORARY, PART-TIME AND FLEX WORKERS

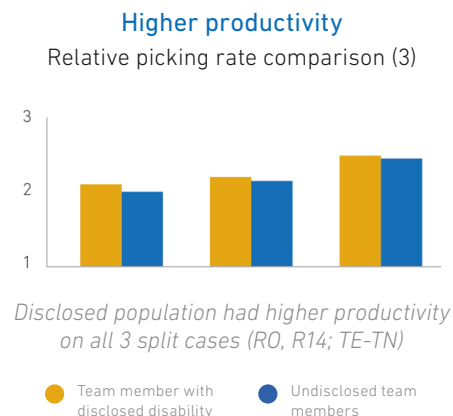
Alternatives to traditional, full-time staffing arrangements can provide warehouses with access to a larger pool of prospective employees. There are many segments of the population that cannot or would not work 40 hours per week but may be open to opportunities for part-time, contract or seasonal work, such as parents who want to work while their children are in school, students seeking employment in evening hours or summers and retirees looking for flexible or occasional work.

The ROI of an expanded hiring pool

Broadening recruiting efforts to include additional groups of potential workers can do more than just fill warehouse job openings. In the case of hiring disabled workers, there are also demonstrated operational benefits.

Starting in 2002, one retail pharmacy chain adopted a program to hire employees with disabilities to bolster their workforce of over 10,000 employees in their supply chain and logistics division. The program was expanded to include 21 distribution centers across the U.S. Today, they successfully employ more than 2,000 people with disabilities — over 20% of the workforce in their distribution centers.

In 2012, [Professional Safety](#), the journal of the American Society of Safety Professionals, published a study looking at the business benefits of the program. They compared key performance metrics of employees who had disclosed disabilities to those of employees that had not disclosed disabilities. The study found that productivity of employees with disabilities was equal to or slightly higher than productivity of their colleagues without disabilities. But, where this population really shines is in turnover rate and number of safety-related incidents and accidents, both of which were significantly lower.



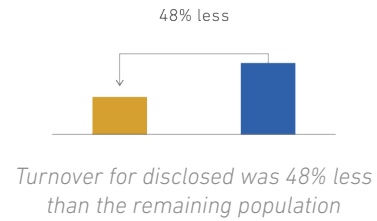
Employees with significant barriers to employment tend to remain loyal to the company that hires them. This is important not only because it is difficult to find good applicants in today's labor market, but it is also difficult to retain employees. Similar results have been replicated across a number of companies.

The safety results might seem surprising because many assume that disabled workers might pose a higher risk of workplace accidents. But what the Walgreens program found — and what many warehouse operations with similar hiring practices have observed — is that people with disabilities often learn and follow operating best practices and facility rules closely, resulting in fewer reported workers' compensation incidents.

In addition to a positive return on investment (ROI) in the form of improved productivity, retention and safety, warehouses have experienced reduced training costs due to financial assistance that may be available from both state and private agencies. Hiring workers with disabilities is not the "nice" thing to do, it is a smart business decision.

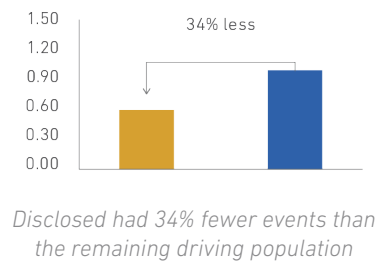
Lower turnover

Employee turnover (%)



Better safety record

Relative incidents-accidents (# per 1000 hours)



	Automotive aftermarket parts retailer	Multinational beverage company	Multinational shipping company
Hires of disabled individuals	1,005	600	550
Retention rate	82%	86%	85%
Retention compared to retention of employees without disabilities	19% better	14-15% better	15-20% better

Strategies to support success

There are several steps warehouse operations can take to effectively integrate employees with disabilities into the workforce.

SCREENING, INTERVIEWING AND ONBOARDING

The way that operations approach screening, hiring and onboarding disabled employees plays an important role in setting employees up for long-term performance and retention. When screening potential employees, understand that some might have gaps in their resumes. Often, companies tend to pass on potential candidates when they see this. But, in many cases, these gaps could be due to the person's disability and are not related to a skills or job transition issue.

During the interview process, understand that some workers with disabilities might exhibit differences in behavior — such as not making eye contact, having closed body language or providing short answers to questions — that, on the surface, might make them seem disinterested in the job. Verbal interviews are often difficult for people with autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or learning disabilities. It is important to understand these signs and not automatically dismiss people who may in fact be great potential workers.

When onboarding, recognize that some disabled workers might struggle until they have developed a level of familiarity with their new environment. Instead of immersing a new employee into their full scope of responsibilities on day one, onboard gradually and with intention.

- Onboard in stages, not all at once. Introduce the worker to aspects of their new position progressively and provide support at each step.
- Manage visually rather than verbally. Show workers how tasks are performed with practical demonstrations and prioritize clarity and conciseness in verbal instruction.
- Provide close supervision initially. Check in regularly over the first couple of weeks to help the employee get into an effective, regular work routine.



OUTLINING EXPECTATIONS

Another important factor for integrating people with disabilities into the workforce is clearly outlining expectations.

- Give employees precise, specific job tasks, including checklists and timetables for completing work.
- Provide clear, concrete directions using straightforward language with no abstract phrases or sarcasm — sometimes, workers with disabilities have difficulty understanding body language and tone of voice. When possible, include written, diagrammatic or pictorial instructions.
- Outline explicit rules of behavior and give workers advice about unwritten or informal rules of the workplace, such as topics of discussion that are inappropriate for the workplace.
- Deliver immediate, clear, open, constructive feedback about the employee's work performance. Workers with disabilities acclimate to a job best when they receive immediate feedback on what they are doing right and what needs improvement.
- Create a structured work pattern that enables the employee to complete one task before beginning another.

CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Successful warehouses already have comprehensive safety plans and practices in place. Adapting those plans to help integrate workers with disabilities is generally a matter of adapting existing systems to support additional safety needs that might be endemic to disabled workers. These practices are not only helpful to those with disabilities but can also improve working conditions for the entire workforce.

- Define a clear line of management and an informed supervisor or mentor who can be available to provide advice. Instructions and advice from multiple people can be confusing.
- Require consistency from all workers to provide an atmosphere of understanding for their disabled colleagues and their needs.
- Set guidelines for colleagues regarding how they can meet individual needs in the workplace.
- Create contingency plans for dealing with stress, including a place to go for refuge and someone who can provide support.
- Make sure employees know how to communicate basic needs including asking for help, such as saying “I don’t understand,” or requesting a break. Create and reinforce a culture of help in the workplace.



ADAPTING TO COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES

One of the most important aspects of creating a workplace conducive to disabled workers is adapting the operation’s communication style to one that is conducive to their needs.

Many with hidden disabilities are visual learners. Backing up verbal instructions with visual cues that reinforce those instructions is a valuable tool in acclimating employees to the workforce. Silence is also another adaptive technique that is beneficial when communicating with workers with ADHD, autism and learning disabilities. Use silence strategically when giving instructions. Give workers a few seconds to process an instruction rather than quickly repeating it.



USE VISUAL SUPPORTS

- Schedules
- Feedback loop
- Checklists
- Work systems
- Training aids
- Conversation supports
- Social cues
- Productivity/awareness aids



UTILIZE SILENCE

- Provide plenty of wait time, especially after asking a question
 - Allow the person to process new information
 - Provide the opportunity to help the person’s neurological system to get back in check
- Do not “restart the loop” by rapidly repeating it

Customer-driven lift truck design for a workforce-driven warehouse

Strategic lift truck design and technologies are also levers that operations can pull to support the integration of disabled employees into their workforce as long as the [ANSI B56.1-2020 safety standards](#) for visual, auditory, physical and mental abilities to safely operate equipment are observed. When incorporated into training and day-to-day operations, these solutions can help improve productivity by making warehouses more accessible not only to workers with disabilities but to the entire workforce.



Training simulators: Simulators allow workers to practice their skills without the potential danger of damaging equipment, infrastructure and product. They give employees the opportunity to ask questions and allow operations to understand what special support, if any, each worker will need to succeed before stepping foot into an actual lift truck.



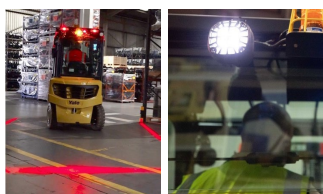
Telemetry: Telemetry provides real-time feedback on individual lift truck activity and location. It enables operations to identify operators in need of more training and support. It also identifies impact-prone areas of the warehouse so that the layout can be better optimized for all operators.



Ergonomic designs: For workers with physical disabilities, features like lower steps, cushioned floors and ergonomic controls can be the key to allowing them to perform the duties of their job. Lift trucks that have seats or perch seats can also be helpful for older workers and those with physical challenges that prevent them from standing for long periods.



Electric motive power: Electric lift trucks are quieter than their internal combustion engine counterparts and do not emit fumes with strong odors. Warehouses using electric forklifts can provide a more sensory-friendly environment.



Lights and alarms: Proper use of pedestrian lighting and audible alarms can help support disabled members of the workforce in maintaining visibility to and awareness of lift trucks in their proximity, especially in loud or visually dense facilities.



Operator assist technology: Many lift trucks can be equipped with operator assist systems that apply automatic interventions to help maintain overall stability and minimize the potential for tip overs; detect obstacles to help operators avoid potential impacts; and enforce zone-based rules in specific parts of the facility. This technology can help increase operator awareness of and response time to employees working on foot around them, including disabled individuals with hearing or vision impairments who may not notice a lift truck approaching in a noisy or visually busy environment. It could also be used to exclude lift trucks from designated areas to provide dedicated space where these individuals can work, separated from lift truck traffic.

Practical steps toward a larger labor pool

It is not uncommon for business leaders to be concerned about whether workers outside of the traditional pool of candidates can perform warehouse tasks successfully. However, given the potential for improved operational performance, exploring a more expansive talent pool can not only ease staffing challenges, but also make strong business sense.

And success does not require a major overhaul. With a few common-sense adjustments and achievable steps, operations can get on track quickly and build momentum over time.

- Champion the initiative and secure buy-in at multiple levels throughout the organization — everyone from the top executives to supervisors on the floor should understand the concrete business case underlying the effort.
- Leverage referral programs where employees recommend individuals they believe would be good candidates to reach out to.
- Partner with local, regional and national disability organizations, specialized hiring groups and veterans-focused organizations to connect with job seekers and secure grant funding.
- Build flexibility into recruiting, hiring and training systems that allows for an individualized approach that can be adapted to work for all types of potential employees.

Yale works with several organizations that can help warehouse operations expand their labor pool and offers a full line of lift trucks and technologies that can help improve warehouse accessibility and performance.

[Contact an expert today to learn more.](#)