

Alcon-HVO Partnership Provides Jobs – and Meaning – for Special-needs Workers



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Preparing disposable surgical drapes, shown here is one of the 321 individuals that HVO employs on a full-time basis. The private, not-for-profit organization also serves more than 250 people in its employment and training programs annually.



(Left to right) Ed Stricker, Assoc. Dir., CUSTOM PAK® Manu. and Engr. and Joe Vonderhaar, Sr. Product Manager, U.S. OVD and Disposables, shown here with former HVO Board Chair, Neal Ensley and HVO President, George Marshall during an HVO open house event.

Workers in gowns and hair nets work intently at immaculate work stations, preparing disposable surgical drapes and other paper products for Alcon.

The scene is anything but remarkable – from the outside. But behind those gowns and hair nets are hundreds of inspirational stories.

The workers are clients and employees of Haywood Vocational Opportunities (HVO) in Waynesville, North Carolina. Established in 1972, HVO is a private, non-profit corporation that, among other things, provides vocational training and employment to adults with disadvantages and disabilities.

Alcon and HVO have partnered for nearly 30 years, though neither side takes the other for granted.

Ray McDonald, Senior Product Manager, International OVD and Disposables, said the contract for the surgical drapes and other disposable paper products is always put up for competitive bid. And yet, time and time again, HVO has submitted the winning bid.

“The quality of their products and service and their interest in advancing what is for us a non-focus product area have consistently put them over the top,” he said. “And over time, it’s grown from having them produce a single drape to a significant multi-million dollar business.”

HVO has been more than willing to expand as Alcon’s needs have grown. Joe Vonderhaar, Senior Product Manager, U.S. OVD and Disposables, noted that HVO dedicated a new, expanded facility in 2007, which was maxed out within a year.

Vonderhaar said he finds himself amazed that an agreement to produce drapes that was little more complicated than an understanding that HVO would produce a product at a specified price has since blossomed into a much larger partnership. “It has just mushroomed from there,” he said.

Vonderhaar said that, when he has visited the North Carolina facility, he has been touched by the stories of HVO workers. “People will say, ‘Oh, you’re with Alcon, well so-and-so works at HVO and can’t wait to get to work everyday,’” he said. “It’s just hard not to feel good about that.”

HVO President George Marshall said the partnership is a clear-cut winner for all involved. HVO’s employees, for example, have often been stigmatized because of their disabilities. However, through the contract work for Alcon, these individuals are able to do meaningful work that provides fulfillment and satisfaction. Alcon, meantime, benefits from HVO’s careful attention to detail and exacting standards.

“You hear this sort of thing said all the time, but in this case, it really is a win-win situation,” Marshall said.

Disabled workers are fully integrated into the workforce at HVO, and not shunted aside into special work units. This workforce integration reflects HVO’s mission of providing such individuals dignity, respect, equal opportunity and the chance to enjoy meaningful, satisfying work.

“We have people come in and tour the facilities and the highest



Shown above during a visit to the HVO facility are (left to right) Tracy Beach, HVO Production Mgr; Dick Wells, Director, Quality Assurance; Gary Tollefson, HVO V.P. Quality Assurance; and Gary Keathly, Senior Director, CUSTOM PAK® Operations.

HVO has more than 148,000 square feet of manufacturing, training and employment space, with plans to add 117,000 square feet in early 2010.



compliment is always when they ask, ‘Where are the disabled workers?’” Marshall said. “And we just tell them, ‘You’ve already seen them. They’re throughout the facility.’”

The HVO-Alcon partnership may seem to represent a strange marriage of interests. Alcon, after all, is a large, profit-driven, international corporation, whereas HVO is relatively small and non-profit.

However, each side has emerged with enormous respect for the other, and a true appreciation of each other’s needs.

Marshall said HVO would never take Alcon’s business for granted, and is ever mindful of the need to provide the highest quality products at the lowest possible cost. “We know we need to stay on our toes, and pay attention to what is going on now and what the market might be down the road,” Marshall said.

HVO’s meticulous commitment to detail made it easy for Alcon executives to decide to reach out to the non-profit for back-up capability to produce CUSTOM PAK® Surgical procedure packs in the event of emergency.

McDonald said HVO is linked to Alcon’s computer system in Houston and serves as Alcon’s fail-safe disaster recovery plan for CUSTOM PAK®.

“This works because of their commitment, our knowledge of their capabilities and their grasp of the market and where the market is going to be,” Vonderhaar said. “They don’t try to do more than they can do. They know what they can do and they have a vision for where they want to go, and it just really, really works.”