



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

MILLENNIAL CORNER:

Thoughts on inclusion from a millennial weaving her way into the industry

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Editor's note: Here is our latest installment of our Millennial Corner feature. This blog gives the younger generation – who in the near future will serve in leadership positions and guide the direction of the association – a larger voice and platform NOW and will help them engage more the entire SEAMS' membership while busting stereotypes.

Greetings SEAMS team! I am still a fairly new face to the group, and I'm so honored to have a chance to share a little bit about me and my thoughts in this edition of the Millennial Corner.

How did I get here?

I honestly feel like I lucked into being a part of the textile industry. I grew up in San Diego, Calif., and ended up working for a defense contractor straight out of high school. I was fortunate enough to work my way up from being a summer Intern to an assistant financial analyst, all before I turned 21 years old. I was sprinting along that career path like my life depended on it, and nothing could stop me. Until it could.

About nine months after my son was born, my husband received orders to Indian Head, Md., (go ahead, Google it). It was our first, and last, big move with the Marine Corps (oorah!) and I had no idea what to do, so I quit my job. After we moved to the end of nowhere, I had tough luck finding a job that could challenge me the way I craved.

One day, a fellow mom who I had met at a Meetup Group for playdates told me about a job at [National Industries for the Blind](#) (NIB). I'd never heard of the organization, but it sounded interesting, so I applied. Come to find out, NIB is the nation's largest employment resource for people who are blind. I was offered the opportunity to work in Product Development Support, where I was able to spend a couple of years learning about the wonderful work NIB does to create employment for individuals who are blind or have significant disabilities through the AbilityOne Program.

Transition to textiles

Eventually, an internal job opportunity came up on our Textile Product Development team. At that time, the extent of my textile experience was helping my mom cut out *sew many* (pun intended) patterns and hemming a few pants as a kid, before growing up and banishing my sewing machine to the storage room to get dusty. Fortunately for me, a textile background was not required, and I got the job!



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I spent the first couple of years on the team doing mostly administrative tasks, but quickly learned that I wanted to be where the action was. When the opportunity came up for me to start doing more product management work, I was thrilled. I was able to start travelling to our various nonprofit agencies (NPAs) and see people who are blind cut and sew complex items like coveralls and combat uniforms. Talk about inspiring!

An untapped resource

I always enjoy the various reactions that I get when I tell people that my job is to find textile manufacturing work for individuals who are blind. Here are just a few examples of the questions I get:

“But how can they see what they are doing?”

Blindness and visual impairments come in different forms. Some people have limited vision, while others may be completely blind, but accommodations can be made either way. We have a team of fantastic productivity and development engineers who create jigs and accommodations for various labor steps to be done in non-traditional, blind-friendly ways.

“But won’t they get hurt?”

Have you ever heard of OSHA? Yeah, we have safety rules in place, too. As a matter of fact, I reckon our AbilityOne NPAs have some of the safest manufacturing facilities around. In addition to standard safety measures, our NPAs utilize additional methods such as grooved floor markers and audio/tactile warnings to ensure their facilities are blind-friendly.

“But the products can’t be good quality, right?”

Wrong. Our AbilityOne manufacturing agencies are held to the same stringent quality requirements as any other organization with a government contract, including the requirement for DCMA representatives to come into each facility to inspect products against Product Descriptions and contract requirements before they can be shipped. The NPAs each have their own Quality Assurance team, detailed work instructions and implemented process controls to ensure quality products are being produced. Most of the agencies are even ISO Certified.

For anyone who doubts these claims, I challenge you to [reach out](#) to an AbilityOne NPA and schedule a facility tour. They are always proud to show off the great work that they do, and I guarantee you will leave with a new outlook on the art of the possible.

With so many businesses struggling to find qualified labor these days, I’d like to let you know that nearly 70% of working-age Americans who are blind are not employed. I encourage you to leverage this highly capable, yet largely untapped, workforce. Partner with an AbilityOne NPA

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to work on a project. Make sure you are inclusive when making hiring decisions – consider that individual with a visual impairment or disability. Maybe subcontract some work to an organization who employs those individuals already. Whatever you do, don't discount their abilities.

Weaving my way

As a woman and a Millennial, I have to admit that I was a bit nervous about the idea of having to learn how to network in what I thought was an intimidating industry. But I have met some truly fantastic people and organizations over the last couple of years.

SEAMS has been such a great resource for me to begin my journey in networking with other U.S.-based textile organizations, especially since so much of the work we do has to be Berry Amendment compliant.

I was fortunate enough to attend my first SEAMS Networking Conference in Myrtle Beach, S.C., this summer IN PERSON. After a year and a half of virtual events, it was so good to see some familiar faces and meet some awesome new people. It was truly a week to remember, and I am already looking forward to attending next year's event.

About National Industries for the Blind

NIB is the nation's largest employment resource for people who are blind, and through its network of associated nonprofit agencies, is the largest employer of people who are blind in the country. We create opportunities for people who are blind to become wage earners and taxpayers, reducing their reliance on government support and increasing engagement with their communities.

NIB connects its associated agencies with manufacturing and service delivery opportunities with the federal government and commercial companies. Our customers get the business solutions that they need, and people who are blind are employed – it's a win-win. We offer career training, which is crucial to getting Americans who are blind employed and keeping them employed. Today, thousands of people who are blind are using these skills in state-of-the-art manufacturing and professional services careers.