

Retail

Helping people with disabilities build rewarding careers

321 Coffee

321 Coffee teamed up with Lenovo to create new job opportunities for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities by enhancing accessibility in the workplace with Lenovo technology.



Lenovo
Evolve Small

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Who is 321 Coffee?

Starting out with a coffee maker and rented fold-out table, Lindsay Wrege and Michael Evans have grown 321 Coffee into a successful café chain that is rooted in inclusion. Primarily staffed by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), the business is committed to creating meaningful employment opportunities for people with disabilities. As well as running five cafés in North Carolina, 321 Coffee roasts and sells its signature coffees to consumers in all 50 U.S. states via its online store.



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The Challenge

A 2023 study by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that people without disabilities are three times more likely to be employed than people with disabilities.¹ As somebody who grew up with a strong involvement in the disability community, Lindsay Wrege is very familiar with the employment challenges facing individuals with disabilities.

“When my friends with disabilities approached high school graduation, they all wanted to find jobs and become self-reliant, but they were rarely given the opportunity to do so or found themselves stuck in unrewarding jobs with no prospects for development,” explains Lindsay. “In college I teamed up with Michael, and together we set out to create a business that focused on hiring people with disabilities, helping them to grow, learn skills, and have more visibility in and involvement with their local community. We started selling coffee at local events and the rest is history.”

¹ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm>

From small coffee stall to master roasters

Inspired by the tremendous success of its first café in Raleigh, NC, 321 Coffee planned to expand to more locations in its home state and set up a coffee roasting facility. Roasting coffee in-house would enable the café to offer a wider range of employment opportunities and support company growth.

Lindsay explains: “Traditional approaches to roasting coffee can present barriers for people with disabilities, and this became clear to us when we visited a third-party roasting facility to roast our beans. For example, traditional methods require a lot of heavy lifting and the application of different techniques in sequence to create a range of coffees with distinct flavor profiles. Our goal was to reimagine this process and make it accessible for staff with disabilities, while also helping them to be less reliant on one-to-one support from managers.”



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“Giving our employees more independence in their jobs and helping them to grow and develop their skills is a top priority for us. We knew that making slight tweaks to the typical coffee roasting process and creating interactive guides tailored to the needs of our employees could help them to have more autonomy. We set out to find a partner who could help us leverage the latest technology to co-create a truly accessible coffee roasting process.”

Michael Evans

Co-Founder, 321 Coffee

Partnerships that drive positive change

To secure resources, technology, and support for its new roastery, 321 Coffee partnered with [Lenovo Evolve Small](#).

The Evolve Small initiative champions small businesses across North America, particularly those owned by women, minorities, and people with disabilities. Through the program, Lenovo offered financial support as well as an extensive technology package—including Lenovo ThinkEdge servers, ThinkBook laptops, Tab Series tablets, ThinkVision monitors, ThinkCentre desktops and Lenovo Go Accessories—to help 321 Coffee build its own roasting facility.

Hardware

- Lenovo M10 tablets
- Lenovo ThinkEdge SE350 edge servers
- Lenovo ThinkCentre M75 Tiny desktops
- Lenovo ThinkBook laptops
- Lenovo ThinkVision monitors
- Lenovo Go Accessories

Services

- Lenovo Premier Support

Accessibility in the workplace

During its engagement with 321 Coffee, Lenovo connected the company with accessibility experts at the Lenovo Product Diversity Office. The goal was to provide solutions to help staff with disabilities at 321 Coffee to roast and package coffee independently and with confidence.

To drive the roasting process, 321 Coffee deployed Lenovo ThinkEdge servers on site to run specialist roasting software, which pulls data from thermostats in the roasting equipment to monitor roasts in real time. In parallel, 321 Coffee created clear step-by-step instructions with intuitive graphical representations for its staff to help them produce high-quality and consistent roasts, which they view on Lenovo ThinkVision monitors installed at the roasting facility.

Managers at 321 Coffee also use Lenovo laptops to collaborate remotely with their colleagues in different locations and support their day-to-day work.



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“With the instructions on the Lenovo tablets, I can roast coffee on my own and feel independent every day at work. I am also really proud to be a role model and help inspire other people with disabilities to achieve their goals.”

Sophie Pacyna
Roaster, 321 Coffee

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Results

Supported by Lenovo technology, staff with disabilities at 321 Coffee can carry out tasks accurately, safely, and with confidence—helping them to gain autonomy.

Launching the new roasting facility has the potential to create up to 200 more work hours per week at the business, which enables 321 Coffee to provide employment opportunities to more adults with IDD. At the same time, Lenovo solutions have helped the café to diversify its operations and scale its ecommerce and wholesale business.



Creates new employment opportunities for people with disabilities



Empowers workers with disabilities to be more independent



Helps 321 Coffee to scale and diversify

Creating new opportunities

By making roasting more accessible with Lenovo devices and edge solutions, 321 Coffee has created a wide range of new employment opportunities for people with disabilities—helping to turn the tide on decades of chronic unemployment and underemployment for this minority group.

“We’re really proud of what we have been able to achieve at 321 Coffee,” explains Michael. “Not only because we have been able to create more jobs for people with disabilities, but because we’ve really seen the people of North Carolina show overwhelming support and build a strong sense of community at our cafés. We hope that by representing the group in our workforce, we will inspire more businesses to hire people with disabilities.”



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“Working at 321 Coffee provides our roasters with opportunities to learn new professional skills. For instance, learning how to use computers and tablet devices, manage emails, collaborate, and support others—these are skills that they can apply to their personal lives to build even more independence. Lenovo has empowered us to provide employment and learning opportunities to people with disabilities and help them thrive in the workplace.”

Lindsay Wrege

Co-Founder, 321 Coffee

Why **Lenovo**?

Working with partners with a strong commitment to driving positive social change is a must for 321 Coffee, and the company was impressed that Lenovo shared its vision of making the workplace more accessible to people with disabilities.

“Our partnership with Lenovo has inspired us to explore how we can leverage technology to increase accessibility and forge new partnerships to achieve this,” says Michael. “Moreover, the Lenovo technology is impressively powerful, reliable, and versatile. For instance, ruggedized Lenovo ThinkEdge servers run our compute-intensive roasting software seamlessly in a hot, dusty environment without any issues.”



How can businesses make the workplace more accessible for people with disabilities?

321 Coffee helps people with disabilities learn new skills and secure meaningful employment with accessibility tools powered by Lenovo.

[Explore Lenovo Evolve Small](#)