



**ORLANDO  
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*Lighthouse Central Florida adds jobs for visually impaired in year of growth*

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The pandemic turned out to be a growth point for Orlando-based Lighthouse Central Florida and its subsidiary Lighthouse Works.

Lighthouse Works — which provides employment with a focus on the visually impaired and blind — operates multiple lines of business, including supply chain, call center, digital accessibility services and more.

Before the pandemic, the nonprofit worked with the Florida Department Economic Opportunity and on reemployment assistance calls for over three years, President and CEO Kyle Johnson told Orlando Business Journal.

"Because they had historic budget cuts since the unemployment rate is so low, we had about 20 agents for DEO. Then the pandemic hit, unemployment skyrocketed and we said, 'We've been doing business for three years, we have business with Universal Orlando and other state agencies. How can we help?' "

The nonprofit grew to 75 agents for the contract. It later also got work with the state Department of Children and Families, where it started with 50 employees and boosted up to 100.

Lighthouse Central Florida and Lighthouse Works now have grown from 83 employees before the pandemic to about 350 now. The call center has been the largest part of that growth, with over 300 employees.

Here, Johnson shares the nonprofit's goals, stigmas it has to overcome, challenges and more.

**What are your goals for 2022 and beyond?** For any business, you want to drive growth in all your businesses. We have invested a lot of time, energy and money for sales, business development and marketing. We recently have taken on a marketing partner and are making some investments there. We're building a business development and sales team. Now, most businesses have a lead line that shines, and for us that's call center. While we're going to drive growth in each business line, we expect the call center will continue its growth trajectory. For 2023, I could see us exceeding 500, maybe even 750 employees. Within five years, I expect we may have 1,000. Our overarching aim is to be the largest and preferred employer of people who are blind in the U.S. That's the goal.

**What are some of the stigmas for the organization?** One important thing is Lighthouse Works is a social enterprising business working with real customers who expect real performance. None of our customers are doing this just to be helpful to people who are blind. Every one of my blind colleagues, now easily over 150, they all earn their job like I did and keep their job like me. This isn't a work or training program and we aren't doing them a favor. These candidates are qualified and expected to perform just like their sighted counterparts. Roughly 30% of our call center is sighted employees.



**How do you break stigmas with these companies?** When we talk about our business and mention, 'Oh by the way, the large majority of our employees are vision impaired or blind,' automatically, they say, 'Oh, the work is complex, the system we use is too complex' or 'How do they possibly navigate a computer?' If we can get them to come to us, they'll see the level of sophistication, the innovation that's going on, meet our people and go, 'Oh, this is the real deal.'

**What systems allow blind workers to access this work?** Let's say Acme Company wants to hire us. Acme has a database with all their customers, probably a catalog with products you have to answer questions about. Our blind colleagues are using a system called JAWS, or Job Access With Speech. They have the customer in one ear and the system in the other. Experienced agents, the speech rate of their computer is so fast, it's hard for me to understand. We're doing a demo for a prospect and they ask, 'Is this some language you teach them?' I say, 'Nope, that's the King's English, man.'

**How has the company had to innovate in its work?** Parts of that site may be accessible and the screen reader is reading what it can see, but more times than not, there are parts that are not accessible. Early in our day, if everything was accessible except the computer-based transfer, we couldn't do the business. We actually created a software development team, and our software developer happens to be a man who is blind. We write middleware, where we evaluate accessible and write code that sits between us and Acme's database to make sure everything is accessible. Now how do we stay competitive against our sighted peers in the market, because Universal is not doing this and saying, 'Well, we would be 10% slower or our handle times would be 10% longer.' Part of how we achieve that is when we are writing that code in a call center environment, there are a lot of repetitive behaviors. So we write a code so information can be brought up at once with a hotkey instead of needing three clicks.

**What are some of the challenges?** Right now, having cash for the growth of payroll is something we have to temper. We want to capitalize on our tailwind, we have momentum. Our reputation is growing rapidly in the state. We need the same growth in the commercial market, and we will. A company that is fast growing like ours, you have to make sure your enthusiasm out-kicks your capacity. You can grow yourself off a cliff. Other companies can do mass layoffs and be fine. We can, but we won't be fine because our job is two-fold: mission and margin. Mission is to create jobs for people who are visually impaired or blind, while margin is we can distribute to support the blind services in our own community shoulder-to-shoulder with our donors.

**Who helped your leadership during pandemic:** Our board of directors during the pandemic, including board Chairman Dan Devine. He and the rest of the board have been great champions, business advisors to us and there for us every step.

**Points of pride:** In Q4 2021, we created half of the new blind jobs in the U.S. right here in Orlando. We also won the National Industries for the Blind Employment Achievement Award in 2020 and 2021, and we're on the hunt to win it a third year in a row.



**Kyle Johnson**

President and CEO, Lighthouse Central Florida and Lighthouse Works

**When I took on this role:** January 2019

**Age:** 44

**Education:** Bachelor's in English, Rollins College

**Contact:** Kjohnson@lighthousecfl.org

**Nonprofit revenue:** \$4.15 million

**Passions outside work:** My wife and three kids. I also love playing music, including guitar, singing and percussion. I like to hike, trail run and do a lot around the meditation space. With the life I have, finding that silence helps me not lose my mind.