**Inspiring stories of inclusive businesses[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Increasingly, best practices are breaking down barriers and dispelling myths about people with disabilities in the workplace. In our consultations with employers, many stories emerged of innovative thinking, ingenious solutions and a genuine recognition of the value of inclusion. These are real stories provided by large and small Canadian employers in a variety of industries; they concern employees with a wide range of disabilities. Here are just a few:

**Small technology company**

An award-winning technology company is in the business of designing, developing, and supporting computer networks. Leading in innovation, this company recognizes that talent comes in many shapes, forms and abilities.

Two years ago, the company created a product that was marketed through virtual means by an employee with a motor disability who operated a computer using a mouth stick. After this individual, unseen by the audience, introduced the new product to rave reviews, they were asked if they would like to meet the presenter – and were shocked to discover that he was a person who is quadriplegic.

Witnessing the audience’s response and the product’s subsequent success has galvanized the company’s commitment to embracing full inclusion.

**Large financial services co-operative**

The business model of a Canadian financial services co-operative places significant importance on inclusive culture, and targets underserved populations as part of its strategy. Recognizing that an under-representation of people with disabilities in its ranks ran counter to its values and business interests, the Board set out to change things. The company implemented training and awareness, conducted an accessible workplace review and gathered metrics. They began attending targeted career fairs and celebrating International Day for Persons with Disabilities.

The co-op’s HR managers worked with software vendors to make their application technology fully accessible. Now, applicants with disabilities can make a simple online selection to be contacted to discuss accommodation needs. People who identify that they have a disability are fast-tracked through the system to be interviewed. Tone from the top is unmistakable: The Board holds itself accountable for ensuring follow through and continuity.

**Luxury hotel and restaurant**

A luxury hotel and gourmet restaurant in an eastern province employs about 160 people. Part of the community, this organization has employed people with disabilities in various areas for most of it 30-year history, often turning to community partners to seek new talent.

The hotel has developed a number of simple – and ingenious – ways to help guests and other employees work with staff members who are disabled. Notes are placed in rooms to alert guests to the fact that a cleaner is deaf, directing them to the front desk if they need help communicating.

Hotel staff members are equally supportive. In the laundry room, changes to equipment and layout are checked to ensure they will work for a visually impaired colleague, whose guide dog stays in an adjacent but separate room with a bed and water bowl.

The hotel’s management believes that high staff engagement is a result of the diverse workforce – people genuinely care about each other. The response from guests to the hotel’s diverse workforce has been consistently positive, as evidenced by its leadership market share.

**NHL sports organization**

On its special events team, a Canadian NHL team hired a number of people with mental health and physical disabilities. Since they joined the organization, there has been a marked reduction in turnover in the 250-strong workforce, as well as increased knowledge of disability issues among supervisors.

The benefits also include a growing level of community support from ticket holders who use a wheelchair themselves – and are now escorted to optimal viewing spots by ushers who also use one. Support from the team’s community partner has been a cornerstone of their overall success

**Big Four professional services firm**

When a visually impaired chartered accountant interviewed with and then joined a large professional services firm as a co-op student, he brought along his guide dog. His job was to prepare U.S. tax returns using the firm’s tax prep software, which had to be modified so it would work with JAWS – a Windows-based program that converts electronic text into speech.

The company took a closer look at the student’s job description and realized that the cost of accommodation could be minimized by modifying only the elements of the software used for the bulk of his responsibilities. By applying the “80/20 rule,” the firm allowed him to gain the necessary experience in a cost-efficient manner.

With this minor workplace accommodation, the student successfully achieved his Chartered Accountant designation. “There was definitely a learning curve on my part, and on the part of the firm,” he admits, “but everyone was highly supportive and focused on finding solutions.”

“My story is proof that hiring a person with a disability is not as big a deal as some might think. There may be some barriers that need to be overcome, but there’s always a workable solution.” He adds, “Give people time and they will figure it out. The most important thing is for everyone involved to maintain a positive, productive attitude.”

**Medium-sized law firm**

A southwestern Ontario law firm hired an individual with an intellectual disability to perform administrative and clerical duties. The position was “job carved,” meaning it was created by compiling tasks from other employees that were not integral to their job descriptions. Previously, basic clerical work (such as filing, faxing, setting up meeting rooms and welcoming clients) was being performed by highly paid legal assistants. These tasks were removed from the legal assistant job description, and a full-time job was created.

Four years into the individual’s tenure, a review by an outside source determined that the new position had saved the firm the cost of 2.5 legal assistants. Those employees could better concentrate on the work they were trained to do without distraction from other tasks which, though important, could be handled by the employee with a disability.

**Major Canadian bank**

A manager in one of Canada’s big banks was faced with a disability challenge she had not encountered before: An employee with a bipolar disorder was not meeting performance standards. Despite intensive coaching and performance management, the employee’s performance was not improving. How could she identify a way to improve this employee’s performance and retain him?

Aware that an established employee resource group for people with disabilities existed, she reached out for help. Another employee with bipolar disorder stepped forward, volunteering not only to brainstorm ideas but to act as a peer mentor. This employee pointed out that the core duties required of the job were not conducive to a person with bi-polar disorder – basically, the employee was set up to fail. They worked together to identify another job in the bank that had duties that were more suited to an individual with bipolar disorder. The employee was transferred to the new job and his performance issues were immediately resolved.

**Bay Street law firm**

When one of Canada’s leading law firms set out to revamp its facilities, a strong culture supporting diversity led to a focus on inclusive design. The law firm understood that this would benefit not only their clients, but all members of the organization. Referring both to talented employees and clients, their attitude was: “If we build it, they will come.” In their opinion, they have.

The Managing Partner set up a steering committee to meet with the workspace designer. They began by exploring the range of possible disabilities, which led to questions and attention to detail the designer had not encountered in discussions with other professional services clients. “What can we do about table height? Are the temperature controls accessible? Is there sufficient natural light and the right kind of light for people with mental health issues?”

This proactive approach has spread to other areas of the law firm. In hiring discussions, HR people now ask all new employees, “What do you need to make yourself more successful in our firm?” It’s a simple question, but one that opens a sensitive dialogue, breaks down communication barriers and leads to innovative solutions.

1. From Dr. Gary Birch, Kenneth Fredeen, Kathy Martin, and Mark Wafer, “Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector: Report from the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities,” (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)