Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector

In July 2012, the Government of Canada appointed a panel to consult with private sector employers, as well as other organizations and individuals, on the labour market participation of people with disabilities. The panel members were asked to identify successes and best practices in the employment of people with disabilities, as well as the barriers faced by employers, and to report on their findings. In-person and telephone consultations were conducted with almost 70 employers, and feedback was received from approximately 130 online submissions. Responses came from organizations of all sizes across the country and in a broad range of industry sectors. While the consultations were the main focus of the panel’s efforts, research was also conducted into the business case associated with hiring people with disabilities in Canada and other jurisdictions.

This report is directed at Canadian private sector employers. The following points are highlights from the panel’s findings. The entire report is available on request, in a number of different formats from Public Works and Government Services Canada at: 1 800 622-6232. HRSDC Cat. No.: ISSD-111-01-13

795,000 Canadians are working aged but are not working and their disability does not prevent them from working. Almost half, 340,000 have post secondary education.

Mr. Mark Wafer is the owner of six Tim Hortons locations in Toronto (and a panel member). Mr. Wafer and his wife Valerie have employed 84 people who have a disability over the past 18 years. There are currently 35 employees with disabilities in all areas of their business, from entry-level positions to logistics, production and management.

“Many companies are doing great things, but more education and training are needed”

“Hiring people with disabilities is good for business”

“We need to have people in our workforce who can do the job best, and we have found that sometimes that person just happens to have a disability.”

Many companies volunteered the importance of awareness training and education for existing staff, particularly recruiting and hiring managers.
All the companies we consulted had policies and practices for accommodating existing employees who acquired disabilities. However, most had not utilized this expertise to actively connect with potential new hires. They told us this was because there is no clear and straightforward approach to identifying qualified candidates with disabilities. Community partners and government programs could potentially assist, but employers have limited recruiting time to identify and access potential candidates. The connection between employers and community partners is a significant issue.

Others noted that while genuine job requirements exist, assumptions about disabilities can create unnecessary barriers: We don’t know what we don’t know.

The report contains common myths around disabilities i.e workers have more accidents, require extra supervision, accommodation is expensive.

Case Study

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.

To quote Rich, “We have found that companies that perform well in disability are highly responsive to their customers, and thus outperform peers in revenue growth.”

“Companies told us they had an improved ability to attract talented, innovative people, and that there was greater employee loyalty and commitment.”

JAN study on employer accommodations (Contained within the report)

Top six direct benefits reported after making accommodation (percent mentioned).

- Retained a valued employee 90
- Increased the employee’s productivity 71
- Eliminated costs associated with training a new employee 60
- Increased the employee’s attendance 53
- Increased diversity of the company 42
- Saved workers’ compensation or other insurance costs 39

Top six indirect benefits reported after making accommodation percent mentioned

- Improved interactions with co-workers 66
- Increased overall company morale 61
- Increased overall company productivity 57
- Improved interactions with customers 45
- Increased workplace safety 45
- Increased overall company attendance 38

Customers

Businesses cannot market effectively to customers with disabilities if they don’t recognize and truly understand their needs. When companies create an inclusive workplace – which includes a strategy for hiring people with disabilities – they build understanding and acquire knowledge. In so doing, they create an identity that employees and customers want to share. They can tap into this market as both an employer and a marketer, and gain a Competitive advantage.