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BUSINESS VOICE

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Above: Michelle Wilson with Job Developer Carlton McDonald in the kitchen of New Leaf Enterprises, Easter Seals Nova Scotia's skills training and supported employment program.

Inclusive values

Persons with disabilities belong at work **By Erin Elaine Casey**

Photos: Joseph Robichaud/Tanglewood Studio

Have you ever stopped to think about why you get up and go to work every day? Aside from the need to earn money, we go to work for lots of reasons: To learn, to help people, to solve problems, and to make friends. If we're really lucky, we have jobs that challenge and satisfy us, and our colleagues become almost like family.

Now, what if I said you might not be able to have those things — a job you enjoy, work buddies, and of course a paycheque? For many people with disabilities, this is a daily reality. According to Statistics Canada, in 2011 Canadians 25 to 64 with disabilities were employed at a rate of 49 per cent, compared with 79 per cent for Canadians without a disability. And the more severe the disability, the lower the rate, with only 26 per cent employment among those with a very severe disability.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines disabilities as “physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder [a person’s] full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” A disability can be permanent or temporary, visible or invisible. According to Statistics Canada and the Nova Scotia Disabled Persons Commission, almost 20 per cent of Nova Scotians identify themselves as living with a disability, the highest rate of any province in Canada. With the demographic and labour market challenges facing Nova Scotia, employers have an opportunity and a responsibility to learn about and hire from this under-represented group.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES WANT WHAT WE ALL WANT

Michelle Wilson has three jobs. She works one day a week at the Colorworks paint and decorating store on Strawberry Hill, and two days a week in the mailroom at the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services. She also spends a couple of days a week in the kitchen at New Leaf, the skills training and supported employment program and social enterprise run by Easter Seals Nova Scotia. Easter Seals is a charity that provides services to promote mobility, inclusion, and independence for persons with disabilities.

Wilson also has a mild intellectual disability. When I ask her what life would be like without a job, she says: “I like to be busy. Life would be boring if I didn’t



The best learning is on the job, pictured here, Kelsie is supported by DASC job coach Jill Eaton learning about receptionist duties. Executive Director Cathy Deagle Gammon is giving some tips on filling out a schedule.

go to work.” She also likes making friends and being included in social activities, although her favourite place to be is at her workstation. She laughs and adds: “The best thing about going to work is money!”

Carlton McDonald is an Employment Support Instructor with New Leaf Enterprises. “It’s important for different kinds of people to work together and get to know each other,” he says. “The friendships I see Michelle making with her co-workers — they just want to share and give Michelle the best experience while she’s there. She’s part of the team.”

Cathy Deagle Gammon is Executive Director of the Dartmouth Adult Services Centre (DASC), a non-profit vocational day program for adults with an intellectual disability. She adds that persons with disabilities are “just like anyone. They get bored, just like anyone else. They have the same general characteristics as anyone else. Anyone starting out today is going to have many more jobs than older generations — people with disabilities are no different in wanting variety and change and looking for an employment culture that fits their values.”

“Once an employee is settled in a job, It’s lifelong support as needed. But sometimes we get fired, we have an employer who says, ‘We’re all good.’ Some employers have said to me: ‘It’s a lot easier than I ever thought it was going to be. There’s just no difference between them and any other employee.’”

— Cathy Deagle Gammon,
Executive Director,
Dartmouth Adult
Services Centre

SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEES — AND EMPLOYERS — IS ALWAYS AVAILABLE

A number of agencies and charities in Halifax support adults with disabilities in joining the workforce. In addition to Easter Seals and DASC, *Business Voice* spoke with Tova Sherman, co-founder and CEO of ReachAbility, an organization “dedicated to equalizing the playing field for people facing barriers.” This includes persons with disabilities of all kinds, including mental health; the Indigenous, African Canadian, and new immigrant communities; and the LGBT+ community. “Anyone facing a barrier is part of my world,” she says.

In addition to a wide range of pre-employment and employment supports, ReachAbility offers diversity training to employers. “When we look at inclusive employment, we want to make sure the foundation is built for people to believe in themselves first,” says Sherman. “We do self-awareness and self-confidence first. We have a career navigation clinic with a professional certified therapist. We have a sustainability officer, so when they fall off work, we grab them, pull them back and put them back on the horse as soon as possible.”



L to R: Tova Sherman, Gordie Publicover and Brea Hindy. Sherman is co-founder and CEO of ReachAbility, an organization dedicated to equalizing the playing field for people facing barriers.

At DASC, three staff members are dedicated to the person-centred community employment program. They help people set goals, identify a skill set, and plan for employment. Participants do a lot of preparation, including training in workplace safety, literacy, first aid and CPR, understanding relationships, protection of your own information, and using public transportation.

“We even do workshops that address appropriate attire and cell phone use — anything that’s going to build a skill set that’s transferable to any job,” says Deagle Gammon. “Some employers have remarked that the people DASC supports have a very informed sense of self that they’d like to see in their other employees.”

Once a person with a disability has been placed in a job, staff from DASC, ReachAbility, and Easter Seals work hard to help keep them there. Job coaches and employment support staff help with training, skill building, and identifying supportive colleagues in the workplace. If there’s a challenge, all three agencies are there to ease transitions and bridge gaps.

“We gradually fade away” once an employee is settled in a job, says Deagle Gammon. “It’s lifelong support as needed. But sometimes we get fired,” she laughs. “We have an employer who says, ‘We’re all good.’ Some employers have said to me: ‘It’s a lot easier than I ever thought it was going to be. There’s just no difference between them and any other employee.’”

IT’S JUST NOT TRUE: DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES

This can be a hard thing to talk about. There are plenty of myths about persons with disabilities in the workplace: They need expensive accommodations, they enjoy repetitive tasks, they’ll drive up the cost of benefits plans, or they simply won’t fit in. None of these things is true.

“Most people with disabilities have figured out what they need a long time ago,” says Sherman. In other words, they have good self-awareness and coping skills, an asset in any work environment. And persons with disabilities want to

learn, have variety, and be challenged. Deagle Gammon explains, “A person with a disability does not necessarily like doing the same thing day in and day out — something repetitive. And they do not have high medical costs. The cost of hiring a person with a disability is not higher than hiring someone without.”

Finally, modifying a work area for someone with a disability is not costly. A study by the U.S. Job Accommodation Network showed that 57 per cent of employers spent nothing at all, and for those who did the typical one-time cost was around \$500. According to many studies, workers with disabilities have substantially lower rates of safety incidents, health care costs, and absenteeism.

“It’s all about giving and opportunity, and a lot of businesses in the past weren’t quite willing to let people in because they weren’t sure about the energy and productivity they can bring,” says McDonald. “That has come a long way, and businesses are now seeing the light. People with disabilities want to come in with their energy and positive work ethic and do a good job.”

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR HIRING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IS STRONG

According to the Government of Canada report Rethinking DisAbility in the Private Sector — Report from the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, hiring people with disabilities is good for business. Business leaders agree on the value of inclusive workplaces, and “their beliefs are supported by the performance of corporate diversity leaders on the capital markets, as well as data on employee retention and productivity.”

Sherman says the business case is clear. “You’ll make more money — it’s proven. When you bring in people who reflect your community, your customers will support you. You’ll also have more creative solutions. We have to speak to employers in their language — if it doesn’t make business sense, don’t do it. I believe in right person — right job. But I don’t expect businesses to know it in a vacuum, which is why I provide training.”

Tips for making your workplace more inclusive

1. Learn the meanings of words like disability, handicap, and impairment so you can have more comfortable and respectful conversations.
2. Remember that some disabilities are invisible.
3. Create an atmosphere where it’s ok to talk about disability, mental health, inclusion, and accommodation.
4. Find ways to accommodate. Is your workplace physically accessible? Are schedules flexible? Can job duties be safely modified?
5. Make sure your hiring and retention is inclusive. Reach out to all corners of your community for applicants. Be specific about what the job entails so that applicants can be confident about applying. Ensure orientation, training, and scheduling is respectful and flexible.

[Adapted from ReachAbility’s *Tips for Inclusion* www.reachability.org/tips-for-inclusion]

“When we look at inclusive employment, we want to make sure the foundation is built for people to believe in themselves first.”

— Tova Sherman, Co-founder and CEO, ReachAbility

An inclusive workplace is also likely to be a happier workplace. “The benefits are so intrinsic that people are no longer asking me why they should have an inclusive workplace — it just becomes part of their value system,” says Deagle Gammon. “And employers often find they can tailor a job to fit a potential employee. If you see everyone as equally valuable, it breeds good workplace morale. When you hire someone, and they’re supported by agencies, family, and friends, you get a person who is ready to engage in work. It is fairly incredible in some people’s lives.”

Carlton McDonald has high praise for workplaces that do what it takes to be inclusive. “I’ve been doing this job for 12 years. When I first started, I was pounding the pavement with very little success. Now people are contacting Easter Seals

and asking for people to come and work with them. It’s huge for a business to provide opportunities for inclusion, and set people up for success — it’s matching skills to opportunities.”

It’s easy to see that inclusion also makes good economic sense for Nova Scotia. More people working means more people contributing to the economy, paying taxes, and gaining financial independence. Persons with disabilities can be found in all sectors and at all occupational skill levels. “They’re really blossoming in the labour market,” says Deagle Gammon, “Any job worth doing is worth doing right, and somebody has to do it. Whether you’re digging a ditch or being a doctor, all jobs are important and have value. And everybody has a right to be a fully participating member of society.” ♦

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