

THE COSTCO CONNECTION

November/December 2017 • Volume 30 • Number 6

The magazine for Costco members

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Companies, and workers, benefit from inclusive employment

BY RICHARD SEVEN

MARK WAFER wasted no time when Goodwill closed 16 stores and 10 donation centres in Ontario nearly two years ago. The Costco member took to social media and invited displaced workers to apply for jobs at his six Tim Hortons restaurants.

He did it because he knew many of them had disabilities and would have steeper challenges finding new work. Before finding success, Wafer, who is deaf, had lived the frustration, too. "That was probably the catalyst to begin hiring workers who have disabilities when we opened our first restaurant in Toronto," the franchise owner tells *The Connection*. "The first person we hired with a disability still works with us today, 21 years later. He is an exceptional worker."

Wafer currently employs about 250 workers, 46 with a disability. Over the past two decades, his business has employed more than 130 workers with disabilities in every aspect of the business. Some of his employees are developmentally challenged. Some are deaf or blind. Some weather multiple sclerosis. The list goes on.

"The key to our success has been recognizing that being fully inclusive actually has many tangible business benefits. There is a clear economic case for including people with disabilities in meaningful

and competitively paid jobs," he says.

Still, the inclusive employment picture across Canada (and the U.S.) isn't pretty. According to government statistics, the employment rate of working-age Canadians with disabilities is about 50 per cent. Only 25 per cent of those with intellectual disabilities or on the autism spectrum are employed.

"The No. 1 barrier to employment for people with an intellectual disability or autism spectrum disorder is attitude," says Don Gallant, national director of Ready, Willing and Able (RWA; readywillingable.ca), a national partnership initiative of the Canadian Association for Community Living (cacl.ca) and the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance (casda.ca).

A key role of RWA is to dispel misconceptions of the abilities of individuals with an intellectual disability or autism and raise awareness about the business benefits of participating in inclusive hiring. RWA defines employment as "real work for real pay," with clients becoming part of the general workforce and paid industry-standard wages.

While the majority of hires are by local businesses, RWA has also established national partnerships with several employers who hire RWA's clients at loca-

tions across the country. That includes all Costco locations across Canada.

Finding the right fit

Gallant, Wafer and other advocates across the country emphasize that hiring a more diverse workforce is not just good business, it is better business. They cite evidence that workers with disabilities often have a low rate of absenteeism and a high will to perform. Companies can get more efficient, occasionally reconfiguring workflow so better-paid and more highly trained workers can skip the simpler tasks. Morale blossoms within the staff, as does goodwill from customers.

"It's incredible to see how many emails and phone calls we get daily asking if we are the Tim Hortons who hire people with disabilities," Wafer says. "Customers want to shop at retailers who hire from the fabric of their community. As a result, I am seeing sales increases and transaction increases far above the average for my region."

People with disabilities also can thrive in the white-collar world. The Ontario law firm Cohen Highley began its inclusive employment experiment almost 30 years ago by contacting a community agency that audited various tasks within the litigation office with a supported worker in mind.

Mark Wafer, left, with employee Clint Sparling.

Partner Joe Hoffer, who has been honoured for his advocacy, says the decision proved to be both the right and the smart thing to do. The firm found a great worker who helped efficiency, employee morale and client regard. "Most importantly, we gained a valued, productive and loyal employee who worked for us for 18 years before her retirement," Hoffer says. "During that time she got married, bought a condo, lived a full and productive work and social life and paid taxes throughout her career."

Over the years, the firm has hired about 40 employees with disabilities.

Wafer has worked with Joe Dale, executive director of the Ontario Disability Employment Network, and other advocates to challenge officials and businesses to be more open-minded and put good intentions into practice. The federal government created a panel, on which Wafer served, to learn about the "disincentives" of hiring people with disabilities and to find solutions and tips.

"Although the participation rate has not shifted much, the awareness has increased exponentially over the past five years," says Wafer.

People with disabilities are too often treated as a monolith. They all have different abilities and circumstances. Their opportunities, ambition and need for accommodations differ.

But work matters to everyone. It helps put food on the table and clothes on our backs. It connects us to the evolving world. It develops and affirms our identity. Even when it feels like a slog, work engages us and shapes potential.

Clint Sparling, who has Down syndrome, was the first person with a disability that Wafer hired, and he still works for him, looking after one of the dining rooms. Sparling has been married for 10 years and lives in a condo. "Having a job and a paycheque means I can live a full life, contribute to my family and support my wife," Sparling says.

The challenges ahead

Finding work can be a team project. The goal for an agency such as non-profit Avalon Employment, in Newfoundland, is to identify a disabled person's strengths and interests and secure the right fit in terms of employment. Job coaches sometimes provide one-on-one help, but with eventual self-sufficiency in mind. Avalon

proudly notes its clients have worked more than a million hours since 1992.

Monitoring can make a big difference. In one case, a woman wanted to leave a retail job she had held for more than a decade. An Avalon counsellor found out the woman spent her free time volunteering for a nursing home. With Avalon's help, the client was able to secure a full-time job with the home.

RESOURCES

- Ontario Disability Employment Network, odenetwork.com
- The Canadian Association for Supported Employment, supportedemployment.ca
- Ready, Willing and Able: Building an inclusive labour force, readywillingable.ca

Supported employment can also be a family affair. Parents, siblings and other loved ones are often eager partners.

Bob Brookens, of Issaquah, Washington, has cerebral palsy and is quadriplegic and non-verbal. Yet he performs quality-control assurance work for Direct Interactions, a Seattle-based call centre

outsourcing company. With the help of assistive technology, a job coach, schedule flexibility, a caring family and a strong will, Brookens, 45, has held the job for the past six years.

In 2011, a job agency connected Direct Interactions with Brookens, who started working with augmented communication devices when he was 8. Now, he listens to recorded customer service calls on his MacBook Air computer, which he controls with small head switches, and assesses the skill of the call takers.

Brookens' father, Doug (both are Costco members), and brother, Scott, have helped troubleshoot hardware issues, from building chairs to tweaking software, but Bob's determination is the key.

Not long ago, Brookens treated his family to lunch. A small thing? Not to him and his father. Both beamed with pride before the first bite.

"I've often found myself saying, 'No, Bob would never be able to do that,'" says Doug, "only to be proven wrong. His job is much more than something to fill his days, as it represents an accomplishment of which he is quite proud." **C**

Richard Seven is a freelance writer in Seattle.



Bob Brookens does quality-control assurance work with the help of assistive technology.

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