ODEN

Ontario
Disability
Employment
Network

Réseau ontarien
d'aide à l'emploi
pour les personnes
handicapées

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Part 1: Right mindset and being proactive are the keys to sourcing "hidden" talent

Any business owner or hiring manager wants to make sure they hire the best-qualified person for the job who's the right "match" when they are recruiting talent. That's because the entire recruiting process is a significant investment of time and money.

These days, most recruiting happens online. For businesses, posting career opportunities online is a double-edge sword. On the one hand, it reaches a vast pool of skilled, qualified talent. On the other, companies are missing out on another vast, hidden talent pool — skilled people who have a disability.

Online recruitment is one of the most cost-effective methods to reach a large, diverse pool of candidates. For talented job seekers who have a disability, however, online recruitment may be creating unintended barriers to accessing employment. Inaccessible websites, with tools and applications that are not user-friendly for people who have a disability can make it difficult to search and apply for jobs.

Once you have determined your website is accessible, attracting talent using inclusive job postings is a great start. Employers need to ensure that job descriptions are also written with inclusion and diversity in mind; ensuring that essential duties for the job have been identified and that inadvertent barriers have been removed from the document.

For example, be sure you distinguish between essential and non-essential job requirements. (Does the candidate really need a driver's licence and access to a vehicle, or do you really want an employee who has access to reliable transportation?). Provide concrete examples of duties and tasks whenever possible. Don't forget to identify the desirable characteristics or qualities an employee should bring to the job, ie., leadership, problem-solving abilities, reliability. These simple steps will move you closer to an inclusive and accessible job posting.

What it takes to source the hidden talent pool

Successfully attracting skilled candidates who have a disability requires broadening the candidate search beyond posting a job online. Bring a human element back to your recruiting process.

There's a school of thought that the recruiting process is broken. If your recruitment strategy for talent relies on algorithms and key words in resumes uploaded online, you could be

weeding out many qualified candidates who may have been the perfect fit regardless of whether they have a disability.

Mary McIninch and Ted Maksimowski noted in a June 17 Globe and Mail article about chatbots, algorithms and artificial intelligence used in recruiting today, "We're not against innovation in talent acquisition, but the human element needs to be at the heart of recruitment."

Making the candidate search human again

For job-seekers who responded to a Canadian Abilities Foundation study, the top two ways they secured employment were:
- through personal contacts (24%)
- with help from employment service organizations that work with people who have a disability (20%)
- Looking at it from a hiring manager's or recruiter's perspective, then, this clearly shows that the ideal ways of accessing the disability talent pool to find qualified people are by:
- connecting with employment service organizations in their business's local communities
- making better use of their employees and personal networks as referral sources to skilled candidates who have a disability

This is confirmed by a major American joint survey by the National Organization on Disabilities, the Harris Interactive and the Kessler Foundation. According to the extensive study, these are the top four ways businesses source qualified candidates in the disability talent pool:
- employee referrals (70%)
- word-of-mouth referrals (70%)
- online job portals (58%)
- help from community service organizations (40%)

That word-of-mouth route to this talent pool is a key one. A study by the Canadian Abilities Foundation, titled Neglected or Hidden: Connecting Employers and People with Disabilities in Canada found the top way job seekers who have a disability get information on job leads is through friends and personal contacts (73%).

Job seekers are utilizing their networks. So, it makes perfect sense for hiring managers to do the same.

Gaining access to the talent

An excellent way of sourcing qualified people is connecting with employment service agencies in your area that engage with job seekers who have a disability.
The Ontario Disability Employment Network (ODEN), for example, works with businesses and employment service organizations to enhance and increase employment opportunities

and outcomes for job seekers in the hidden disability talent pool. ODEN connects businesses to its member organizations — attaching them to local support and a local pipeline of talent — and helps foster those relationships to ensure long-term connection.

Have the right mindset and be proactive

Successfully accessing the disability talent pool requires having the right mindset and being proactive. When you:

- commit to hiring with diversity and inclusion top of mind you are looking for qualified people who are the right match for the job, and also happen to have a disability
- proactively research the resources available to you; make human connections in recruiting efforts; and go beyond posting a job online you will source skilled, qualified people in this talent pool

Part 2: How and why to make your recruiting process accessible for all

When you're looking for qualified people to join your business, how accessible is your recruiting process?

Think about this for a minute.

In 2006, the United Nations adopted the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). It internationally established accessibility as a basic human right for "all persons with all types of disabilities."

And there are accessibility laws in many countries and jurisdictions. In the U.S., for example, there's the well-known Americans With Disabilities Act. In Canada, there's the landmark Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). Passed in 2005, the AODA was the first legislation of its kind in Canada. And it made the Province of Ontario one of the first jurisdictions world-wide to have an accessibility law. Then in June 2019, Canada's federal government passed the Accessible Canada Act (ACA). Although it's important to note the ACA applies only to federally regulated business sectors.

The driver behind all these laws is removal of barriers to inclusion that people who have a disability continue to face in society every day. The belief is that everyone — in Canada and elsewhere in the world — deserves the opportunity to participate fully in their community and workplace; and to have an equal chance at success. This includes when they're applying for jobs. What does all of this mean? That it's a good idea to review your recruiting process for accessibility.

In theory, there should be almost no accessibility challenges — including in the talent recruiting process — left in Canada or other countries with accessibility laws. But statistics and research show that there's still much to do on diversity and inclusion (D&I). In Canada, for example, the national employment rate of people who have a disability is 59% compared to 80% for people without disabilities. This means opportunities are being missed by both businesses, and by people who have a disability.

There are numerous success stories and case studies that show when individuals, business, public sector agencies and educational institutions work together, employment opportunities for people who have a disability increase. Making sure their talent recruitment is inclusive is one thing businesses can do to help ensure they are increasing access to opportunity. Every business needs to recruit talent. But making your recruiting process accessible and inclusive means being intentional. It requires developing and implementing strategies that will sustain and increase accessibility for job seekers, your current employees and your customers as well.

Opportunity for improvements

It starts with where and how you look for qualified talent. Today, pretty much the number-one way for anyone — regardless of whether they have a disability — to apply for a job is online. Through either one of the many job-listings websites, or directly through a company's "careers" portal. And that can be problematic.

A 2015 survey by the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology (PEAT) found 46% of respondents rated their last experience with an online job application as "difficult to impossible."

There is a lot of room and opportunity for businesses to make their online application portals and processes more user-friendly for applicants who have a disability. The PEAT survey found there are seven top accessibility issues in online recruiting:
- Complex navigation
- Timeout restrictions
- Lack of video captions
- No alt text for images
- Bad screen contrast
- Inaccessible form fields
- Mouse-only clicking options for buttons

The good news is, as Toronto internet lawyer Gil Zvulony noted in an essay on internet law and accessibility, published on his firm's website, "The solutions to these problems are in most cases very simple. A redesign of the website is rarely necessary."

There are numerous plugins for accessibility available including ones for:
- User customization of font sizes and colour schemes
- Making form fields more accessible
- Text-to-speech conversion
- Testing your website for accessibility

Why meeting WCAG is crucial

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0) is an internationally accepted standard for web accessibility developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). Following WCAG 2.0 will make content accessible to people with a wide range of disabilities, including:
- Blindness and low vision
- Deafness and hearing loss
- Learning disabilities
- Cognitive impairments
- Mobility impairments
- Speech impairments

There are websites that check your site's accessibility level and compliance with WCAG 2.0 and 2.1 (released in 2018). Thinking of your business on a global level for a moment, these guidelines are part of being compliant with accessibility legislation such as:

- Americans with Disabilities Act
- Australia Disability Discrimination Act
- E-Government Act (Austria)
- Law on Accessibility (Brazil)
- Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act
- Accessibility for Manitobans Act
- Nova Scotia Accessibility Act

The WCAG 2.0 set out standards for things such as:

- Making sure videos (including recruiting videos) on your website are captioned
- Use of high-contrast colours
- Voice recognition and text to speech
- Good, clear site design
- Easy navigation
- Large links, buttons and controls
- Customizable text, ie., size adjustment
- Keyboard compatibility for completing actions such as application form submission

It doesn't matter whether your business is a small-to-medium enterprise (SME), or a corporation with several locations. The tools for testing and refining the accessibility of your online application portal and process exist. But making this first part of your recruiting process more accessible and inclusive requires having the right mindset, too.

There's a difference between making sure your career portal meets WCAG 2.0 standards and is therefore legislation compliant; and being proactive. It's about wanting candidates to apply online by creating a quality online application experience for candidates who do or don't have a disability, thus increasing accessibility for all.

Revisit your job postings

Of course, before a qualified applicant who happens to have a disability fills out that online job application, they're going to read your job posting. This is another area where there is opportunity for many businesses to make the recruiting process more accessible.

Sometimes job descriptions inadvertently exclude qualified candidates who have a disability because of the way they're written. It's a good idea to follow some best practices when you're writing a job posting for two important reasons. First, it helps attract top talent including people who have a disability. Second, it shows your company's commitment to creating an inclusive work environment for all employees.

Here are [seven tips for creating highly effective job postings](#) that can help you make this part of your recruiting process more inclusive and accessible.

One of the most important things you can do in a job description is communicate your brand message about D&I within your organization. This is because your brand is everything you say and do, and how you say and do it. Include a paragraph about your company's policy on D&I. Communicating your core beliefs on inclusion, accessibility and accommodation helps attract qualified candidates, regardless of whether they have a disability. They'll see your organization as a company that can meet their needs. That makes you an employer of choice.

Staying on the interview rails

You've narrowed down your short list. It's time to bring in potential "rock stars" for that first interview. And this is where reviewing your recruiting process, and being proactive, can really help prevent things from going awry at the interview stage. Think about where your business is located, and where you're going to hold interviews. These days, an initial, brief pre-interview by phone or video is pretty much the standard. And with captioning and voice-to-text technology that's available, making accommodations in these interviews is easy.

The challenge can come when it's time for the in-person interview with the recruiter, hiring manager or a panel of interviewers.

In your interview process, you could end up losing out on a candidate. All because perhaps the floor, interview room or entire building where you're holding in-person interviews, isn't accessible. To avoid issues, make sure you have a plan — and a place — in mind for the location to hold interviews. Also make sure the interviewer or interview panel is well trained in D&I.

It's important to take into account more than just the physical space or technology you have for interviewing any candidates you attract. You also need to make sure your hiring teams have been through unconscious bias training and reflect the diversity you want to continue enhancing. Making your recruiting process inclusive by being proactive rather than reactive can raise your brand profile and business reputation in a positive way. It shows everyone involved in the recruiting process that your organization is committed to D&I.

The accessibility solutions you provide for interviews will also depend on each individual candidate. That's why it's good to do a comprehensive audit of your entire recruiting process for D&I.

Getting expert help

Sometimes the interview process also has a test and assessment component. Timed editing and writing tests are common when you're hiring for a marketing communications role, for example. Or perhaps a coding test for someone applying for a developer role.

But a traditional, formal interview and assessment may not bring out the best in all candidates, regardless of disability. You can consult with a professional employment service agency to develop enhancements of your interview and assessment processes that work for everyone.

You may be reading this and starting to feel overwhelmed. But most often, businesses discover that making their recruiting processes more accessible and inclusive is much simpler than they anticipated.

Consulting with an outside organization that has expertise in the disability sector can help make refining your entire recruiting process beneficial for everyone involved.

The time to do it is now. For too long, as Laura Sherbin and Julia Taylor Kennedy of the Center for Talent Innovation in New York City noted in a December 2017 Harvard Business Review article, "companies have viewed employees with disabilities through the lens of compliance and accommodation. There's no better time to start to look at disability through a different lens: of inclusion and infinite possibility."

Part 3: Harness the power of tech for making your workplace inclusive

For everything from communications, to point-of-sale to supply chain management, businesses rely on technology today. It's ingrained in and integral to business operations. Artificial intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing how companies manage their supply chains; how customers pay at the point of sale; and how businesses recruit.

There's a lot of power in emerging AI, and in other technology, that can be harnessed for making workplaces more diverse and inclusive. Developments in assistive technology (AT) are taking diversity and inclusion (D&I) to the next level. The needed mindshift isn't far behind.

Notes one employment specialist in Brockville, Ontario, who's closely involved with development of virtual reality modules for career exploration and works with career-seekers who have a disability:

"Businesses are thinking about technology for the impact on how they use it to affect their businesses, not for 'how do we use it to bring in people.' I don't think the mindshift is going to take long to happen. I think it'll be within the next one or two years, because businesses are already realizing the benefits from it on the operational side."

Technology makes accommodation easier than ever

The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center in Chapel Hill, NC, says AT is playing a big role in fostering more D&I in North American workplaces. IntelliGaze, for example, has since 2008 "empowered several thousand users around the globe," according to the company's website. It's a communication system that enables people who have a physical disability to control their computers with their eyes.

With the technology that's now readily available, making workplace accommodations for employees who have a disability has never been easier. Smartphones have built-in voice recognition software. There's Google Assistant and Amazon Echo. In the latest versions of presentation software, such as Microsoft's PowerPoint, there's built-in voice recognition that automatically captions slide presentations.

"Artificial intelligence has been getting better and better, and in recent years there's been this great increase in capability," Saqib Shaikh, a Microsoft software engineer, said in an Associated Press video about some of the latest advancements in assistive technology with AI.

In 2018, Microsoft launched a US$25-million initiative billed as AI for Accessibility. It's focused on building better AT for people who have a disability using the power of AI. Microsoft has already developed an experimental smartphone app called Seeing AI. It uses computer vision and voice narration to help people who are blind or partially sighted navigate their environment. Seeing AI reads everything from currency bills; to can labels; to sticky notes; to office-door nameplates.

There are also things such as the Brightsign data glove, developed by a U.K. start-up AT company. It will facilitate communication for people who are non-verbal. BrightSign can be personalized for custom hand gestures. And the glove can output speech in any language. This gives users complete control over sign-language libraries and verbal communication.

"It used to be that you had to work at a big AI company or a big-data company in order to harness the technologies in AI. But now there are so many open-source algorithms or repositories that people have access to, they can actually create a lot of these technologies themselves," Zvita Krieger of the World Economic Forum told the AP in the video report on new innovations in AT.

eVantage project
In Ontario, a two-year project started in 2018 is looking at ways technology can be introduced and implemented in the workplace to alleviate dependencies on job coaches/developers/facilitators. The eVantage project is exploring technology and, more specifically, mainstream software and smart-device apps available on the Apple Store and Google Play, such as:
- calendars and checklists
- transit, mental health and weather apps

In all, seven community and employment services agencies are involved. The Ontario Disability Employment Network oversees project research and evaluation. The eVantage project goal is two-fold:
- Embrace technology to determine how apps can best help an employee who has a disability succeed in a role without reliance on a job coach
- Build capacity to improve effectiveness in employment supports; to enable virtual job coaching where possible; to assist users with task implementation/retention; and to assess workplace performance

In the eVantage project, one technology being harnessed to make workplaces more inclusive, is Avail Support. It's an education-based software platform promoting learning and independence for people who have an intellectual disability. Among other things, Avail Support helps employees complete workplace tasks. The customizable task-analysis app breaks down tasks into smaller, achievable and measurable steps.

Three categories of tech for workplace D&I

Technology for making your workplace more inclusive essentially falls into three categories:

- Accessible technology (AT). This includes anything mainstream that's designed to meet a variety of user needs and has AT solutions built into it.

- Artificial intelligence (AI). Innovations in AI are making workplaces more inclusive and workplace experiences better for people who have a disability. There are significant AI advances in predictive text, visual recognition and voice-to-text transcription.

- Intelligent voice assistants. These are generally considered AI, but often talked about on their own because the use of this particular technology is so widespread.

Affordable, portable solutions

There's a plethora of technology available for workplace accommodation. Sometimes the first thing people think is that "sophisticated and expensive devices" are needed, notes LD Online. It's an organization that provides information for people who have a learning disability. There's no need to feel overwhelmed — there are plenty of other options, the organization points out.

"AT can also be found in less complicated devices that are [affordable], such as talking calculators. AT can even be found in existing technology, such as the spell checker of a word processor," LD Online says on its website.

There are other portable solutions including:

- **Digital audio recorders** — verbal instructions can be recorded and downloaded as an mp3 or .wav file
- **Reading pens** — they can be used to scan and read aloud single words, or lines of text
- **Colour-coded thumb drives** — different colours can be used for different information, and easily transported between workstations

Understand the need first

The key to properly and successfully harnessing the power of technology for workplace inclusion is this: Understand what the person needs so they can thrive, be productive and add value. There's a five-step process for determining the most suitable technology solutions for making your workplace more inclusive:

- Define the situation
- Explore resources
- Choose the AT
- Implement AT accommodations
- Monitor and evaluate the AT solution

The return on investing in employees who have a disability far outweighs any dollar investment that may be required for accommodations, including AT. There are numerous business benefits stemming from using technology to make your workplace more inclusive of

people who have a disability. These include increased productivity, overall growth and improved profitability. Not to mention improved employee engagement and higher retention. According to Statistics Canada, retention rates are 72% higher among staff who have a disability.

Having the right mindset about AT and embracing it for D&I in your workplace does more than create direct business benefits. It creates an organizational culture in which everyone feels safe, appreciated and valued — which drives more business benefits.

Part 4: The keys to creating an inclusive culture in your business

The culture of your business plays an important role — the more inclusive it is, the better off your business. It doesn't matter whether you're at the helm of a global corporation, or a local small-to-medium enterprise (SME).

In a January 2018 Deloitte Review article, The Diversity and Inclusion Revolution — Eight Powerful Truths, co-authors Juliet Bourke and Bernadette Dillon noted that organizations with inclusive cultures are "eight times more likely to achieve better business outcomes."

Creating an inclusive business culture has to start from the top down. If you — the business owner or the CEO — don't drive the creation of an inclusive culture, it's not going to happen. It's that simple.

Why diversity and inclusion are different

Where do you start with the creation of an inclusive culture? With understanding that you need to look at diversity and inclusion (D&I) separately. They're not the same. You can have a culture of diversity, but you may not have a culture of inclusion. The two have erroneously "been coupled for the last 40 years," according to a Gallup article by Ella Washington and Camille Patrick.

"Lumping them together reduces an organization's ability to improve both. Understanding and addressing them separately is essential," the co-authors noted in their article, 3 Requirements for a Diverse and Inclusive Culture.

Here's the difference: Diversity means there are people from different ethnicities, religions, genders, orientations and abilities in your business. Inclusion, on the other hand, means all of those people feel safe, comfortable, valued and accepted in their work environment.

In a 2016 Cornell University ILR School report titled Inclusion of People with Disabilities in the Workplace: Best Practices for HR Professionals, report author Danielle Collier noted, "Inclusion is about feeling like a person belongs in an organization. Ideally, employees should feel like they 'belong' while at the same time being valued for their unique characteristics and perspectives."

If you've hired with diversity but some or none of those employees don't feel safe, comfortable, valued and accepted in your business then you don't have a culture of inclusion.

Working on your business

This is why looking at them separately is key. If a thorough, separate analysis and review of D&I in your business reveals nothing is lacking in either element, then you have a truly inclusive culture already.

It's easy for SME business owners to get caught up working in their businesses instead of on their businesses. Developing an inclusive culture is part of working on your business. SMEs can have an inclusive culture, just like large organizations. It's less a matter of resources and more a matter of mindset. Where there's a will, there's a way, goes the saying.

Deloitte put it this way in a 2017 "Canada 175" report titled, Outcomes over optics — Building Inclusive Organizations: "Becoming a truly inclusive organization requires courage. Organizations must chose to fundamentally change the culture — their way of acting and being."

Corporations often have the human resources to launch multi-faceted D&I initiatives as part of one big project all at once, across the organization. Small businesses can create an inclusive culture by thinking like a large corporation, but take smaller steps towards the end goal. A first step could be arranging D&I training for all your staff, for example.

Many facets of creating sustainable inclusive culture

Here are ways of making sure your business has an inclusive culture:

- **Start by making inclusion part of your company values and setting the vision**. Communicate those values and vision to all employees at every opportunity. In town-hall sessions, on posters, in employee handbooks, in one-on-one or team meetings.
- **Develop and support a D&I policy**. Having a written policy, and making sure it's followed, is essential. This is part of demonstrating commitment to creating an inclusive environment. If you don't have an official policy on inclusion, then you can't "walk the talk."
- **Form employee groups focused on D&I**. Think of your employees as customers as well as staff. Look at it this way: When companies are developing a new product, they often hold customer focus groups. That customer feedback tells them things such as what they're doing right; what could be improved; what features they'd like to see in the product. A D&I focus group can help increase employee engagement; indicate whether you're on the right track towards your D&I goal; and create a culture of inclusion from the very start of your initiative.
- **"Walk the talk."** Simply saying you believe in inclusion, or having a written policy on D&I, isn't enough. As the business leader, your actions really do speak louder than your words. Part of inclusion is employees having trust in the company's management and leadership teams. If employees feel as though you're paying only lip service to D&I, there's no trust. Employees won't feel valued or respected; or that they can talk openly about D&I. There's no way you can have a truly inclusive culture. CIBC is a good business case example of "walking the talk." The bank is intentionally and actively making D&I part of its workplace culture. Company

leadership set a public goal of hiring 500 people who have a disability every year.

CIBC is on the way to exceeding that goal for the third year in a row. As well, the bank encourages staff to join its People Networks. These are groups that foster stronger connections to the community. CIBC is also "walking the talk" with physical accessibility. A new Toronto complex designed as an inclusive workspace for almost 14,000 staff is expected to open in 2020.

- **Provide D&I education for employees**. There are outside organizations such as The Ontario Disability Employment Network, and other consulting firms, that specialize in this. Investing in D&I education for your employees does two important things. First, it's an action that shows your commitment to creating a truly inclusive environment. As well, education can help overcome resistance to change.

For front-line staff and supervisors, general disability awareness training is probably ample. For managers, however, D&I awareness training needs to also include making sure they're diligent about treating employees who have a disability like any other employee. They need to understand the importance of managerial etiquette and adhering to human rights legislation.

Putting staff through disability awareness training can help dispel myths. Notes Collier in her Cornell University report, it "helps to decrease stereotypes and judgements about individuals with disabilities and can also offer concrete suggestions for interacting with people with disabilities."

- **Survey your employees to measure the climate of D&I**. Asking questions is important. Because it's how you gather qualitative and quantitative information about the state of D&I in your organization. Ask employees how they feel about the existing work environment and culture. Then it's important to listen to their answers, and respond to them. If survey responses indicate there's an issue needing attention, that's the place to start.

For surveys like this, it may best to enlist the help of an outside firm or organization that specializes in D&I. They can help you develop a voluntary survey that asks appropriate questions and yields beneficial information. There is sometimes a goal for surveys to have employees "self-identify." But it's important to remember people who have a disability aren't required to disclose unless it directly affects a job requirement. If employees or candidates aren't comfortable revealing a disability because they fear the consequences, then they won't in your survey. Which could indicate you don't have an inclusive culture.

- **Nominate a D&I champion for the business**. It doesn't matter whether you have five employees, or 5,000. Having someone who's dedicated to inclusion, and who can inspire and motivate others, can go a long way in creating an inclusive culture in the business or organization. The D&I champion can lead initiatives and drive cultural change.

- **Proactively source qualified talent from the disability talent pool**. If you're not doing this, you're missing out on many opportunities and business benefits. Even more important, when you hire qualified people who have a disability, you're inherently starting to create a culture of inclusion.

- **Make sure inclusive culture extends beyond the office**. Whether it's an off-site team building event; or the company holiday party; or an after-work get-together just to socialize outside the office, make sure your events are at an accessible location for all employees. When you're promoting your internal events, do it in a variety of formats. For example, have video or slide presentations about the planned activity captioned.

- **Make everyone accountable**. You need to have some key performance indicators around D&I for everyone. When everyone has a stake in sustaining an inclusive culture, it will be sustainable.

When it comes down to it, an inclusive culture is based on three things. Treating employees with respect; valuing them for their strengths; and demonstrating inclusive behaviour as leader of the business. Then you are on your way to intentionally creating a culture in which everyone feels safe, comfortable, valued and accepted in their work environment.

Part 5: Making onboarding inclusive and successful for everyone

Inclusive and successful-for-everyone onboarding is integral to the overall inclusive culture in your business. But there's just one crucial thing — you need to have an onboarding program to begin with.

According to statistics, onboarding is an afterthought for many businesses. An Allied Workforce Mobility Survey found almost a quarter (22%) of companies don't do formal onboarding.

The same survey showed only 28% of businesses have really successful ones. Just under half (49%) of companies said their onboarding regimens are "somewhat successful." Statistics show that people who have a disability are more loyal to the organizations they work for than other employees. But poor onboarding experiences lead to employees leaving within their first year. A third of new hires look for a new job within six months. Within a year, 25% of new employees leave.

"Competition among the most innovative companies is growing ever more heated for one of the most highly-coveted resources on the market: talented employees. But sadly, too many new hires slip away because of a poor initial experience with their new companies," wrote Keith Ferrazzi in a March 2015 Harvard Business Review article. Ferrazzi is CEO of Ferrazzi Greenlight, a consulting and training firm in Los Angeles.

Best-in-class onboarding has big benefits

Then there's onboarding done right. With a best-in-class approach. It has noteworthy results.

- A 2013 research study by Aberdeen Group found that businesses following best practices in onboarding retained 91% of their employees.

- According to Statistics Canada, retention rates are 72% higher among employees who have a disability. So, creating a positive onboarding experience can add even more to the employees-who-have-a-disability retention rate.

- Employee performance and productivity are also better with best-in-class onboarding, the Aberdeen study found. It notes, 62% of new employees met their "first performance milestones on time, as compared to 17%" in organizations without robust onboarding programs based on best practices.

The onboarding phase is the most crucial time in an employee's experience with your business. How do you make it inclusive and successful — benefiting both your business and all your employees?

Best practices to follow

Follow some best practices, for certain. It may require evaluating — and possibly rethinking and reinventing — your onboarding strategy and tactics.

"Excellence in onboarding results from a combination of strategies, capabilities, and enabling technologies. The Best-in-Class display a number of common core characteristics," notes the Aberdeen report.

Here are some best practices to follow for first-class, inclusive onboarding:

- **Ensure every aspect of onboarding is accessible**. This is the first and foremost best practice for creating an onboarding program that's inclusive and positive for everyone. Documents need to be available in a variety of formats to meet different needs. PowerPoint presentations and online training modules should be captioned. Any needed assistive technology (AT) should be in place before the employee's first day.

Making the rounds to meet managers and colleagues is often a standard part of first-day and -week onboarding activities. The entire workplace should be physically accessible. Or, these meet-and-greets should be arranged in one location easily accessible for all. As well, any group or individual activities (such as problem-solving exercises) need to be accessible.

There's generally a lot involved in creating a successful onboarding program. Adding the essential accessibility layer may require enlisting the help of outside experts. That is, unless your business is well along what PwC calls "the D&I maturity curve." If you're well along the curve, you're thinking strategically and not tactically about D&I. Perhaps you're at the curve point where you've invested in having staff who are singularly focused on D&I. If so, they need to own your onboarding program.

- **Collaborate for success.** Perhaps you recruited your new employee from the "hidden" disability talent pool with the assistance of disability-sector agencies and organizations such as the Ontario Disability Employment Network. If so, work with these D&I experts through the entire onboarding process. They can provide guidance and assistance. They'll help you make sure all aspects of your onboarding are accessible, and that the entire experience is successful and positive for everyone.

- **Remember that onboarding is different from orientation.** Orientation is an activity — just one part of the process. Onboarding is the entire process. It consists of three broad parts. The first is "forms management," which includes all the paperwork new employees need to complete. Then there's "task management." This includes making sure the new person's workstation is all set up; that they have access to all systems; and that a meeting with their manager is arranged. The third element is "socialization" — getting the new person engaged in the company culture.

- **Plan the first day in advance.** The first day on a new job is stressful for any new employee. Like any other new hire, people who have a disability expect everything they need for doing the job they've been hired to do, to be set up already. They'll probably have questions about everything from their role and responsibilities; to the locations of important rooms and their accessibility. You'll need to give new hires an orientation tour of the workplace. They'll need introductions to their immediate colleagues.

On their first day new employees want to feel comfortable, not stressed out. It's important to find the balance. Planning too little — or not at all — can create a memorable poor first-day experience from which no one benefits. It can have lasting ramifications. First-day experiences set the tone for employee loyalty and retention. "A positive first day, with some interesting work, can leave a lasting impression," says Connie Malamed, an eLearning coach.

- **Align onboarding with your business goals.** "Deep commitment to aligning onboarding initiatives to overall business goals" is a characteristic of best-in-class organizations when it comes to onboarding. That's according to the Aberdeen Group research study. It's not enough to just have a goal of creating a successful and positive "people" experience for everyone. Onboarding experiences can affect employee productivity and performance, and business growth and profitability. It's important to have an onboarding program that's intentionally inclusive and that helps you achieve your business goals. This requires being closer to the strategic-thinking end of that D&I maturity curve.

- **Get all employees involved in awareness training.** This is part of [having an inclusive culture](). Disability awareness training for your team is a good idea because it can help avoid etiquette and disability-terminology issues. It also can help make everyone confident in any employee interactions.

Encourage staff to be a mentor for the new hires. This can help with employee retention. A study by the Society of Human Resource Management found that new employees who were assigned a mentor built more knowledge about the organization and were more invested in it.

Another option is creating a "buddy" system during onboarding. It's a common practice when businesses hire several new people at once. This helps with the socialization part. There are two ways to approach this practice. One way is pairing two new employees. As they support each other through acclimatization to the culture, they're forming interpersonal relationships. Another way of "buddying up" is matching a new hire with an employee who has been in the organization for some time and is familiar with the culture, processes and people. They, too, are relationship-building with the new hire as they support the person through the socialization period. Both approaches are beneficial and can help create a positive onboarding experience.

- **Own the onboarding process**. "It may seem like a fundamental concept, but the majority of onboarding programs fail due to a lack of ownership," states the Aberdeen Group in its 2013 study. Only 9% of organizations have an onboarding manager, the study found.

Traditionally, Human Resources is the department primarily responsible for onboarding. But often, "various departments and key stakeholders are typically involved in the creation, implementation, and measurement" of onboarding programs, notes the Aberdeen Group.

The study found that in 26% of organizations, learning and development departments own the onboarding process. In 22%, HR owns onboarding. Taking ownership of the onboarding process means people have a stake in it. It helps drive the incentive to create a process that results in a memorable process for everyone. For all the right reasons.

- **Invest in technology**. "The best onboarding experience puts all required information online where it is more easily accessed and searched before and after new hires start," notes Jobvite. This includes everything from forms and policies your new employee needs to fill out and read; to organizational charts; to information about company events; to a portal for new employees. "Make sure that your new hire portal is also available on mobile so that everything a new hire might need is always at their fingertips," says Jobvite. Of course, accessibility is the overarching factor when you're looking at technology solutions for onboarding.

- **Make the onboarding period long enough.** The Aberdeen Group notes, "Traditional new hire programs last for one week or, in some cases, a single day. These short-term strategies fail to improve areas such as retention, productivity, and engagement." It generally takes a year to 18 months for new hires to really settle into their new role and the company. And most new employees make the decision to leave or stay within their first year. But only 15% of organizations have an onboarding process lasting longer than six months, according to the Aberdeen Group study.

- **Think of onboarding as an experience, not as a process or program**. This may actually be the most important best practice. Sonja Gittens-Ottley, the head of D&I at Asana points out, the way you think about onboarding in your business is central to creating an inclusive and successful experience for everyone involved. She says more often than not, "the focus is on getting new hires ramped up and contributing rather than settled in." This is when onboarding becomes "more about process than experience". And it results in a failure "to really connect new hires to their new role, team, and company."

An inclusive, rewarding onboarding experience is the final stage in an inclusive recruiting process. In many ways, it's the most crucial part. Doing it well positions employees, and your business, for future success and growth. Not doing it well means you may end up starting recruitment for a role all over again within a few months. And that can hurt morale, culture, productivity and the bottom line.