

A Pathways to Independence Initiative

“SHARING KNOWLEDGE
AND
PRACTICES”

Summary of the November 2006 Workshop

Hiring Persons with Disabilities

COUNCIL FOR
PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES



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Strategic Workshop

Spring 2006: 'Pathways to Independence' Released

The Report *Pathways to Independence* is a seminal document for the Greater Peterborough Area. The Report was released in the spring of 2006 as a collaborative project of the Workforce Development Board (WDB) and the Council for Persons with Disabilities (CPD). As a 'current-status' review it very clearly articulates the realities of the disabled community in this part of Central East Ontario. As a report that environmentally scans the 'landscape' of our community it positions reliably and accurately both the challenges and opportunities for all of us as community-minded residents, providers, employers, civil servants, decision makers, advocates and politicians. The 'Sharing Knowledge and Practices' workshop is one of several outcomes of the *Pathways to Independence* Report that is being implemented by the WDB, the CPD and their partners. As such, the Workshop is the focus of this paper and must be seen as an adjunct on the employment discussions that occur in the full *Pathways to Independence* Report and its summary entitled *Community Consultations: Executive Summary*.

Of particular importance to the 'Sharing Knowledge and Practice' workshop, a very few of the significant findings and recommendations of the spring Report, which touch on employment and training/retraining, will be referenced here to provide the context for the workshop.

- Approximately 46% of Ontarians with disabilities are in the workforce as compared to 80% of persons without disabilities;
- Based on the provincial disability rate of 16% there are approximately 20,000 to 33,000 residents in the Peterborough with a disability;
- Service agencies indicate that employment services were a significant gap in service for persons with disabilities;
- Finding employment is stated as a critical barrier for those with disabilities;
- Based on the extensive consultations and research the dynamic of enhanced employment and training services is a clear priority for next steps;

- The Report recommends the implementation of a strategy with, among others, the following short-term step.....'establishing a committee of local employers to advance the employment of persons with disabilities'; and the following long-term one.....creating more internships and short term employment contracts as a means to introducing persons with disabilities into the workforce'.

Summer and Fall 2006: Workshop Preparation

The WDB looked to its partners in the community to develop and plan the Workshop at the Peterborough Lions Community Centre on November 17, 2006. The workshop planning committee gathered partners

from the public and private sector, clients and advocates, all three levels of government and both the business and the labour communities. The planning committee was initiated in July 2006 and met, as a full committee, on the following six occasions: August 3 and 24, September 6, October 3 and November 7 and 15. On four other occasions, meetings of several members were held on specific tasks such as developing the case study and the invitation roster. This planning group, in itself, is a dedicated and expert panel for the preparation of this November strategic workshop and as an ongoing resource to others in our community.

The workshop was both very well attended and received by the community: approximately eighty- four local service providers, clients, employers, government officials and other leaders attended. The format of the workshop was a moderated panel discussion following a presentation by Dr. Mark Nagler. Dr Nagler is an academic, researcher and respected resource in the field of persons with disabilities; Mark was born with cerebral palsy and has taught extensively at universities in both Hamilton and Waterloo, Ontario. The workshop featured a panel of local experts with expertise from the perspectives of employer/management, service provider, client, union/labour, human resources, Council for Persons with Disabilities and law/legislation. The latter perspective was provided by a nationally recognized authority on the law and persons with disabilities, Patti Bregman. Ms Bregman is a lawyer based in Toronto who has also been involved professionally in the development of the recent legislation entitled '*Accessibilities for*

Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005'. It is very important to note that this legislation will touch on the lives of persons with disabilities throughout Ontario and is gradually being introduced through provincial regulations.

The planning committee prepared a case study that was crafted around a recently laid-off individual with a disability, living in Oakwood, who is seeking employment in a unionized environment in Peterborough. The committee 'built in' a number of issues or dynamics within the 'case study' as educational or learning points for the discussion at the round tables at the workshop. Six different dynamics inherent in the case study were pulled out as round table discussion topics. Each round table was asked to concentrate on their assigned issue and given the level of attendance there were two tables discussing each of the six dynamics. These round tables considered the following:

1. A round table discussion on the hiring process and the actual interview from a human rights and proper HR policy perspective.
2. A discussion to tackle the dynamics that would arise if the candidate disclosed, either in writing or in person, that he/she had a disability.
3. A round table discussion as to the dynamics of whether to hire or not to hire the new employee.
4. A discussion to focus on the new employer's responsibilities to accommodate the new hire.
5. Following the hire of the person with the disability, a discussion of the employee/employer dynamics that would arise if the situation were complicated by the new hire experiencing a significant mental health challenge.
6. A dialogue as to the unfortunate situation where the new hire needs to be terminated.

Again the intent of the round table was to provide a facilitated opportunity for approximately five to seven individuals to discuss in depth each of the above six dynamics from various perspectives. The make up of each table strived for a mix of employers, clients, providers, human resource professionals and others. The learning that occurred for all the attendees was a

shared experience of confronting and resolving the various aspects of the case study: appropriate interviewing skills/approaches, human rights issues, adopting sensitive human resources policies, practical considerations of workplace accommodation and role of community resources. Attendees came away with a broader and more sensitive understanding and awareness of each others' roles and accountabilities.

Main Themes from the Workshop

There was both excellent attendance and also thoughtful and vibrant discussion at the workshop. This dialogue produced a wealth of information which has been distilled down and categorized, somewhat arbitrarily, under the following major themes. These themes are the potential directions and building stones for others to consider and pursue through discussion and partnership development. The local knowledge is now available in the *Pathways to Independence* Report and will remain current and topical for the next three to five years (the exception to this is the demographic data which is updated by Statistics Canada every five years).

This paper provides a further reference for those issues touching on employment and persons with disabilities. The main objective, though, for the Workshop was to provide the attendees with the knowledge and professional contacts that are realized through the round table discussion and the plenary reports.

Issues regarding employment and persons with disabilities

A particularly significant outcome, reported at the Workshop, is the establishment of an Employment Committee under the mandate of the Council for Persons with Disabilities. Mr. Vali Ali announced at the Workshop that the CPD would be moving ahead in December 2006 with this committee. As Chair of the Employment Committee and member of the Council, he noted that the information and the next steps/future discussions suggested at the Workshop would form part of the early deliberations and strategy of the Employment Committee. This development, within approximately six months of the release of the Pathways report, reflects the willingness and the commitment of the various partners to build on the integrity and the timeliness of the Report. Vali was an active participant in the planning of the Workshop.

“Great progress to date.....but more needs to be done!”

The ‘Pathways to Independence’ document is seen both as significant milestone and also as a blueprint for our Greater Peterborough Area. This document has defined the environment and the landscape for persons with disabilities and must continue to inform decision makers throughout our area. The simple sponsorship of the Sharing Knowledge and Practices acknowledges that there are leadership organizations like the WDB and the CPD that recognize that persons with disabilities require a community-wide response ‘to continue to move the yardsticks’. There was general agreement that a new, current and very positive framework for the dynamic of ‘employment and persons with disabilities’ was introduced; however, the participants recognized that we all have a responsibility to share and partner with each other to improve opportunities in the workplace. Participants noted the continuing benefits of making and renewing connections with others as a very powerful awareness and learning tool. A table was set up at the Workshop for the display and distribution of organizational information and this too was seen as a very positive by-product of the session. There was a great deal of interest and excitement in finding the proper forum or ‘platform’ to continue the planning and implementation of the earlier ‘Pathways to Independence’ report and the energy and commitment of the Workshop attendees.

“More private sector bosses and employers need to become aware of and responsive to what we learned today.....”

Employers and their HR departments/resources are critical to the community’s ability to enhance opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The participation of the several employers, both public and private sector, is acknowledged and appreciated. These employers and professionals are now better informed and will demonstrate a new leadership within their ranks. The information exchanged within the tables and by the panel discussion indicated that the awareness, sensitivity and approach that are employed by both the applicant and the employer can assist greatly in the recruitment process.

“What are the facts.....?”

One of the learning objectives for the workshop was to provide the opportunity to separate myth and misperceptions from fact and reality. These are the facts:

- It is most advantageous to all involved for the candidate to declare as early as possible that he/she is a person with a disability.
- The candidate knows best the impact that the disability has and therefore the candidate needs to be part of the discussion to consider a solution.
- When ‘inappropriate’ questions are asked by an employer of a person with a disability, they are asked out of a genuine concern and are not mean-spirited. Potential employers may well struggle and fret unnecessarily with this fear or anxiety of ‘fall-out’ from even considering a person with a disability as a potential employee. It is clearly acknowledged that this is an ongoing concern that requires ongoing attention and local learning/educational opportunities for all employers.
- Employers who are anxious about the proper hiring ‘protocol’ of a person with a disability have many resources to reference; in particular, most service agencies that have a focus or mandate in this area have employment counsellors that could assist.
- Awareness education of the entire workforce within a business organization will minimize against any possible ‘backlash’ or resentment to the recruitment of a person with a disability. This may be true particularly in situations where a workplace accommodation is being considered. Our societal norms and principles are very much based on fairness and equal treatment to all; however, our society also recognizes and cherishes our collective capability to be sensitive to and accommodating of differences amongst Canadians. All parties in the workplace, including union leadership and management, need to be involved in raising the awareness and understanding and enhancing acceptance.
- The early involvement of the union representatives, if the person with the disability will be a member of a unionized environment, will facilitate common understanding and better problem solving, particularly if any possible accommodation is anticipated. Union or labour involvement typically is initiated after a new employee is hired but

labour representatives clearly indicated the value of their early engagement ‘as part of the solution and not part of the problem’.

Three Next Steps for Further Consideration

Three practical and realistic suggestions are provided. Numerous ideas were suggested during the Workshop; however, the following three aggregate many more specific ideas and the three are distinct ‘actions’ that are very do-able and are thought to further the yardsticks to gain greater employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

1. **Leadership and Accountability:** The Workforce Development Board and the Council for Persons with Disabilities have clearly demonstrated the benefits of partnership. The Workshop included dozens of other partners which, by their interest and attendance, is indicative of a growing community ownership and accountability to the issue. As noted earlier, the Workshop Planning Committee is a current and available reference group of local representatives that have indicated their commitment to moving forward. As the Employment Committee of the CPD is launched in late 2006 there is the assurance of support from this Committee and a much wider community of interest. The following perspective is suggested:

That the Employment Committee of the Council for Persons with Disabilities look toward both the Workforce Development Board and its Committee as ongoing resources to assist it in discharging its mandate. Further, that the partnership expertise and the leadership demonstrated by the WDB be called upon by the Employment Committee to assist in the development of partnerships with the wider employment sector.

2. **Renewing the Knowledge Base:** The myth or misperception around the interface of the HR department and the hiring of an individual with a disability requires ongoing awareness and sensitivity. The case study was developed explicitly to provoke discussion around the dynamics that would be inherent in the hiring process. The

discussion at the round tables clearly indicates the interest in an appropriate and professional understanding of related human resource issues. Peterborough has a progressive group of human resource representatives; these same professionals are active at the local level through their professional organization: The Human Resources Professional Association of Peterborough (HRPAP). The following is recommended:

That the Employment Committee of the CPD consider approaching the Human Resources Professional Association of Peterborough to: 1) request the cross appointment of a member or of members between the two initiatives, and 2) that the two groups explore the development of a local reference document, guide or handbook that provides potential employers with suggestions, tools and approaches that will enhance the opportunities for employment of persons with disabilities.

- 3. Informing the Employer Community:** The involvement of the employer community, particularly the larger private sector businesses, is both a real challenge and a potentially significant opportunity for furthering the employment of individuals with disabilities. The past and current participation of all employers is both appreciated and acknowledged. There is, however, the continuing opportunity to increase awareness, understanding, and by extension, the employment of persons with disabilities.

The following is recommended:

- That the Employment Committee of the Council for Persons with Disabilities initiate a series of approaches both to individual employers and to associations that represent employers such as the Chambers of Commerce, the Kawartha Manufacturers' Association and the Greater Peterborough Area Economic Development Corporation among others. Additionally large public sector employers such as municipalities, health care and educational organizations need to be included that the Employment Committee develops a roster of individual members from within its own membership and also from the representatives of the Workshop Planning Committee. The approach to either individual organizations or to associations will be to offer to briefly present this*

report and the opportunities that are present to strengthen the local workforce with individuals with disabilities. In essence, the Employment Committee and its partners need to 'get on the agendas' of others so that awareness and partnerships develop.

Evaluative Comments

Preamble:

Evaluative information is a strong tool to assist any organization in appreciating how others perceive, understand and value its energy and work. It is particularly important to continually refined processes so that knowledge and understanding increase and the message is understood. In total thirty-three (33) Evaluation Forms, *completed at least in part*, were handed in at the end of the session. Given that the maximum in attendance was eighty-four individuals this represents a very respectful return response of thirty-six percent (36%). The difficulty is always in trying to ascribe the reaction of these thirty-three individuals to the total complement of the eighty-four (84) who participated in the workshop. Needless to say this extrapolation can not be, nor should be, made to all those in attendance. The reader needs to be aware that, in fact, the fifty-one individuals (64%) who did not complete and/or did not return the evaluation may have held exactly the opposite or counter view and opinion to those that were recorded. Be that as it may, the following results clearly indicate the thinking, feelings and reaction of those community leaders from Peterborough who recorded a response. Additionally, the reaction to the Workshop was very positive and it met its goals of information sharing, awareness building and networking.

Results:

All thirty-one individuals completed the check off table that recorded the participant's response as one of 'excellent, very useful, somewhat useful or not useful' to each of the following three queries:

1. Format of Session(small discussion groups and presentations)

20 of the 33 response checked the 'excellent' category

12 checked the 'very useful' category

1 checked the 'somewhat useful' box

2. Length of Session

14 of the 33 responded as 'excellent'

9 responded 'very useful'

8 responded 'somewhat useful'

2 responded 'not useful'

3. Hospitality

23 of the 33 responded 'excellent'

10 responded 'very useful'

As will be noted above, the vast majority responded either 'excellent' or 'very useful' to the three variables of format of session, length of session and hospitality. The only comments that were less than positive (either 'somewhat useful' or 'not useful') reflected the circumstance that the workshop lasted longer than the anticipated wrap-up.

Not all completed evaluation forms recorded an answer to each of the three following queries. At the end of each question the number of returned forms that recorded a response (but not necessarily a response that was related to the question) is given as a percentage.

1. How will what you have learned today benefit you or your business? (26 returns or 79%)
2. Based on what you heard today, what connections will you make to pursue more information on this topic? (19 returns or 58%)
3. Next Steps: What follow up would you like to see from this session? (22 returns 66%)

An overview of the themes, directions and comments are provided for each of the three questions.

Question 1: 'How will what you have learned today benefit you or your business?'

Networking was the most frequently mentioned benefit. Also, either re-affirming one's present knowledge or new learning was also mentioned frequently. Responses also stressed that the panel discussion gave examples as to ideas and approaches to the effective interviewing and recruitment process for individuals with disabilities. The discussion around the 'legal issues' was noted as new and much needed information; also, the *employer's* experiences on the panel gave a different and balanced perspective to round out that of the client, advocate and social service/employment provider. Another observation indicated that the presentation and panel discussions reinforced the need and value of open and candid communication as opposed to any one of the parties making *assumptions*. It appears that the

information shared during the ‘Sharing Knowledge and Practice’ Workshop went along way to ‘debunking’ certain assumptions and misunderstandings concerning individuals with disabilities and the hiring process.

In conclusion, the objective of the Workshop to provide current and helpful information to the participants was realized. Also, the presence of the employer’s perspective added a balance to the discussion that may otherwise have been lost or ignored if this sector had not been included. The intent of this information is to affect another’s attitude and behavior; as one respondent recorded: ‘.....I am going to inform HR about these new hiring strategies’.

Question 2: ‘Based on what you heard today, what connections will you make to pursue more information on this topic?’

As note above, some 19 individuals or 58% of those who completed the evaluation offered some response to this question. The responses were varied but all nineteen individuals reported a positive response as to their own ‘learning curve’ in dealing with employment strategies and people with disabilities. Some sample responses:

- Take the hand-outs and get better informed;
- Read Dr Nagler’s literature and book;
- Contact local employment support program resources for assistance and advice;
- Better appreciate the various websites and share this information;
- Now know the people and networks to contact in future;
- Continue to collaborate with both the Council for Persons with Disabilities and the Workforce Development Board;
- Keep current with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and its emerging regulations;
- Development of local training resources.

In summary, the attendees have indicated that they recognize both the importance of keeping current on the issues and dynamics being encountered by individuals with disabilities.

Additionally, they appreciate the value of ‘keeping connected’ as a community through the various opportunities and resources that are available.

Question 3: Next Steps: What follow up would you like to see from this session?

Twenty-two (66%) individuals provided a comment to this question.

Of the three questions asked, this Question 3 generated the most consistency in the responses.

The participation by the *employer* sector was clearly indicated as a strength that needs to be fostered and encouraged. A number of responses suggested that this workshop be an annual co-sponsored event which would feature ‘good news’ stories of successful examples where those with disabilities have been recruited. Additionally, it was suggested that a workshop be developed solely for employers; presumably, this would encourage candid discussions and a better understanding of positive recruitment practices. The observation was noted that employers may be ‘fearful’ of a possible negative outcome in the recruitment process and consequently the employer sector would benefit from additional orientation to increase understanding and sensitivity to the ‘hiring’ dynamics. Lastly, the suggestion was made that the information discussed needs to be packaged and provided to the local high schools to assist in their efforts of finding employment for their students with disabilities.

In conclusion, the Workshop ‘Sharing Knowledge and Practices’ was very timely and topical. The guest speaker, Dr Nagler, and the panelists were appreciated for their candor in outlining differing experiences and perspectives. This articulation of differences from the perspectives of the client, union/labour, legal/legislative, employer, service provider and advocate provided balance to the presentations and the debate. The role and leadership of both the Workforce Development Board and the Council for Persons with Disabilities was clearly evident and acknowledged. As might be expected, the networking that was fostered was seen as a very powerful outcome; as was the sharing of knowledge and strategies to encourage the successful employment of persons with disabilities. Finally there is an excitement and an interest in maintaining and continuing this community discussion.....this development clearly supports the recent decision of the Council for Persons with Disabilities to initiate its Employment Committee. It is this very partnership and enthusiasm that has been just created that needs to be captured and nurtured by this new standing committee.

List of Contacts

Patricia Bregman
Lawyer
psb@sympatico.ca

Gene Canning
Ontario Disabilities Support Program
gene.canning@css.gov.on.ca

Alison Davidson
CUPE
adavidson@cupe.ca

Lisa Deflorio
Council for Persons With Disabilities
ldeflorio@city.peterborough.on.ca

Jason King
Employer
j2collectables@cogeco.net

Sharon Hayton
City of Peterborough Human Resources Department
shayton@city.peterborough.on.ca

Michael Allman
Americredit
Michael.allman@americredit.com