



## On the Mark

In the last two blogs on this subject, I talked about the fact that disability is primarily a function of the environment.

Everyone experiences some form or degree of functional limitation. The capacity to participate in the community is determined not by the impairment itself so much as the extent to which that functional limitation is accommodated – in the form of design, aids and equipment, personal assistance and flexible practices.

We all need to start paying more attention to these issues. In Ontario, the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* now requires all public, private and not-for-profit organizations with one or more employees to make a plan for improving accessibility. While the Act applies only to that province, other jurisdictions can learn from this example.

There will be many people who will take action out of legal obligation. But there are others who will act because they know it is really smart for business.

The case of employer Mark Wafer who was profiled on CBC National News on February 26, 2014. He owns seven Tim Hortons franchises in Toronto. In 1995, he made a decision to hire persons with a wide range of disabilities. Mark himself is hearing impaired so he appreciates first-hand the barriers involved in seeking and finding paid work.

Forty-one employees – or 30 percent of his workforce – have some form of disability. The CBC clip shone the spotlight on several of these hard-working and dedicated individuals. More often than not, the employees with disabilities are not just the top performers but the outperformers on the team.

Mark is convinced of the “huge returns” (his words) that his business derives from his hiring decision. In 2011, for example, there was not one single hour of lost sick time among the employees with disabilities.

He noted in a *Toronto Star* interview that “employees who have a disability work 97 percent safer, have attendance records 86 percent greater, stay on the job up to five times longer and increase morale to the point that non-disabled staff stay longer – a huge win for me” [Griffiths 2012]. The turnover of personnel among his franchises is 40 percent while that of his colleague down the street is 75 percent – with all its associated retraining and rehiring costs.

There are many other good reasons to hire persons with disabilities. On the whole, they have good qualifications with similar levels of postsecondary educational and trade certificate attainment as the general population.

Innovation is another factor. The CBC piece included a profile of Walgreen’s distribution warehouse in Windsor, Connecticut. Close to 50 percent of the employees, including those in management, have some form of disability. For example, the various innovations that the company introduced to accommodate the needs of employees with learning disabilities, including the use of pictures and icons rather than words, has driven up the productivity of its entire workforce.

Finally, there is a looming labour shortage. Mark points out that Canada is expected to be short of 1,000,000 workers by 2025. Employers will not be in a position to exclude from the workforce a significant proportion of the population that is ready, willing and able to participate in the paid labour market.

In the 100 or more speeches he has presented on this subject, Mark wants to encourage other employers to experience the benefits he has realized. The business case will speak for itself. He is right on the mark.

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## Reference

Griffiths, A. (2012). “This Tim Hortons franchisee hired 82 disabled workers.” *Toronto Star*, June 10.

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