

## **Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital is leading by example to foster more inclusive hiring practices and better health outcomes**

Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital in Toronto prides itself not only on exceptional patient care, but also on being a leader in accessible and inclusive programs and services for youth and families. Like many healthcare organizations, Holland Bloorview is actively taking steps to increase the diversity of its workforce and become more representative of the communities it serves.

### **Combating employer myths**

Victoria Santo, People & Culture Advisor at Holland Bloorview, says that many employers underestimate the capabilities of people with disabilities. “One of many barriers people with disabilities face in employment is a stigma that a lot of extra effort will be required for training and oversight of the individual’s performance,” says Santo. “We saw firsthand through our summer work experience program that the training required is not more. It may be different, but that can be a good thing.”

Young people with disabilities may face particular barriers in finding work due to employer perceptions that their organization’s costs will increase due to accommodation needs, higher turnover and other human resource challenges.

This is one of the reasons Holland Bloorview’s diversity hiring program includes a strategic focus on young people with disabilities. But, there is a greater reason to hire young people with disabilities notes Tracey Millar, Chief People and Culture Officer at the hospital. “Our hospital’s vision is ‘the most meaningful and healthy futures for all children, youth and families,’” says Millar. “Employment is an important aspect of health and wellbeing.”

By focusing its efforts through the hospital’s Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA) priorities, Holland Bloorview has seen firsthand that a more diverse and inclusive workforce greatly benefits the organization as a whole. In fact, not only do successful summer employment experiences lead to improved mental health outcomes, but they also help build a precedent that can be showcased to help build employers’ confidence in hiring people with disabilities.

In fact, key studies have found that hiring people with disabilities reinforces and demonstrates an employer’s commitment to diversity and inclusion and may strengthen their competitive advantage.<sup>i</sup> Employers with diverse and inclusive workforces reflect the communities they serve and are better positioned to develop and provide products or services to meet their customer’s diverse needs.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Ethan’s example**

Ethan, a neurodiverse high school student, joined Holland Bloorview's People & Culture (human resources) team for the summer of 2021. His strong organization skills and attention to detail made him a great fit for the important task of clearing the team's filing backlog – such as archiving inactive employee files and updating database systems.

Accommodations made to ensure Ethan was able to do his job with confidence and efficiency were found to be basic functions that every organization should have in place.

Firstly, the team met with Ethan before his start date to get his input on things such as how best to structure his orientation, schedule and day-to-day job tasks. This way Ethan was able to share information about himself with his new team. For example, he noted, "sometimes I have a hard time waiting to talk. I am eager to ask questions and move on to my work. I am working on being patient and not interrupting. When I'm listening to instructions or feedback, I may be a bit impatient or a bit worried that I'm in trouble. Sometimes my voice may sound angry or frustrated, but I'm okay."

By asking Ethan for his input upfront about what he needs to do his best work, his job coach and supervisors set him and the team up for success. Other simple actions included: bringing the whole team together for an orientation about working with neurodiverse individuals, outlining the best ways to provide clear, direct communication and feedback to Ethan, directing the team to provide both verbal and written instruction to him, and making sure everyone understood they needed to allow flexibility within the daily scheduling of his required job tasks

Santo explains that these simple steps made the organization even more efficient. "We now have clear procedures for our filing and archiving, and all team members can more easily access the information we need to do our jobs," says Santo. "The same goes for performance management. Ethan asked us to give clear expectations and daily feedback. For example, one of our expectations of him was to put work that he has questions about to the side and wait to ask his questions all at once. This kind of structured, direct, individually customized attention acts as a catalyst to improve communication across the whole organization."

And the invaluable benefits Ethan brought to the team did not stop there. By grouping systematic and routine clerical tasks into a meaningful entry level role for Ethan, these tasks were given a priority they had never had before. Tasks that were often put aside in favour of other pressing work are now completed regularly, making the departmental information more organized and efficient for all. "When these tasks form a small part of other staff's roles they are often the last thing to get done, which can lead to delays and backlogs," explains Santo.

As for the benefits Ethan received from his summer experience, he says what he learned will help him enjoy future employment success. "I learned some things that I will bring to a future job, like how to interact and communicate with people in an office setting, and the importance of arriving to work on time."

As is usually the case, hiring Ethan required only minor accommodations to address potential employment barriers.<sup>iii</sup> As experienced by Holland Bloorview and Ethan, good communication, empathy and a few minor adjustments were all the accommodation needed to better the organization as a whole, and more importantly provide an enjoyable, powerful experience to a young man.

Summer hiring at Holland Bloorview is enabled in part through the federal government's Canada Summer Jobs program.

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<sup>i</sup> Fredeen, Ken, Chair (2012) Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector (2012), Report from the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for People with Disabilities

<sup>ii</sup> Wright, Ruth (2001) Tapping the Talents of People with Disabilities: A Guide for Employers. The Conference Board of Canada

<sup>iii</sup> Ontario Chamber of Commerce (2014), 8 Myths About Hiring People with Disabilities