

How diversity within Sodexo Canada is helping its business inside and out

Many businesses have a tough time filling professional and management positions. Thankfully for Sodexo Canada, a highly skilled and qualified candidate came to the company's attention through its business grapevine when it was looking for a new director of communications in 2017.

To be a strong professional or management employee, you have to think quickly, express ideas clearly and deal with stress well. Making fast-paced decisions that could impact a company's reputation and creating complex plans to build a business's brand takes a unique skill set.

The Sodexo story

Sodexo provides on-site food and facilities management services and supports, which include everything from food preparation and custodial services to personal and administrative supports. Sodexo's clients include corporate facilities, hospitals, schools and manufacturing plants.

While business in the corporate and institutional services sector is busy, it currently has a huge volume of job openings in this province. Many firms in this sector are facing an urgent need to find, hire and keep the right talent. Filling the thousands of vacancies is a major business challenge for Sodexo and many other companies of its kind.

During Sodexo's search for a new director of communications, Anna-Karina—the impressive candidate it had heard of—fit key requirements: she is fluent in English and French, and has internal and external corporate communications expertise. Sodexo executives asked Anna-Karina to apply. She did and the rest, as they say, is hiring history.

How one employee helps make many positive changes

Anna-Karina has excelled as Sodexo Canada's director of communications. An expert in diversity and inclusion, she has helped Sodexo's corporate communications be more accessible in Canada and globally. She herself has a disability because of an acquired neurological disorder.

An award-winning advocate for disability issues, Anna-Karina is often interviewed by media and researchers. During these interviews, she identifies herself as a Sodexo employee. This media exposure not only educates people about the importance of disability issues, but also helps raise Sodexo's profile as an inclusive employer across the country.

It's definitely a profile worth raising. In 2019, it was named one of Canada's Top Diversity Employers for the seventh year in a row. The company's executives are often invited to join both local and national forums and advisory panels. Plus, many clients choose to work with Sodexo because they are impressed by its diversity leadership and appreciate its advice about improving their own diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Within Sodexo Canada, it only took minimal changes to make sure Anna-Karina's accessibility requirements were supported on the job. For example, Anna-Karina was provided with an Apple computer rather than a PC since it came with several built-in accessibility features that she uses. This low-cost measure ended up having broader benefits, and turned out to be an effective IT alternative that other employees have also received.

Myth: workplace modifications are always expensive

Many employers still believe that it is costly to make changes in a workplace to support employees with disabilities. In fact, however, research shows that over one-third of the adjustments only cost a one-time average of \$500. And 30 percent of people with disabilities don't require any workplace modifications at all.

For most of the people who do, it consists of minor changes. The most common adjustments are modified work hours and job redesign, where duties are revised to improve productivity and job satisfaction. Many workplaces have already started to apply these practices.

That was the case with Anna-Karina at Sodexo. Most of the aspects that help her on the job—such as sometimes working from alternate locations—were already part of Sodexo's workplace policy.

By hiring several skilled and capable people with disabilities, Sodexo is successfully finding and hiring the best talent during a time of vast vacancies in the services and supports sector. By building and maintaining an inclusive workplace, the company is growing its competitive edge, ability to be innovative and reputation as a top employer.

Numbers you need to know: corporate and institutional services sector

This wide-ranging sector is made up of firms that provide businesses and institutions with support services such as operating and staffing food preparation and delivery areas, and custodial and maintenance services.

According to Government of Ontario labour market and information statistics, there are significant job openings projected for 2017 to 2021 in the corporate and institutional services sector. That includes up to 20,000 job openings for food counter attendants, kitchen helpers and related services. Plus, up to 20,000 job openings for janitor, caretaker and building supervisors. As well up to 15,000 job openings for general office support workers.