

Onward Manufacturing Company Limited Is Serving Up Some Sizzling Examples Of Inclusive Hiring

While some industries were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Onward Manufacturing Company Limited (Onward) in Kitchener and Waterloo – a world leader in the production of gas barbecue grills sold under the Broil King, Broilmate, Sterling and Huntington brands – saw demand for its products increase as people spent more time at home due to pandemic-related restrictions. The company leaned on a proven method for finding quality employees to help meet the demand.

Onward was well-positioned to meet this increased demand partly because of its almost 16-year partnership with KW Habilitation – a local, not-for-profit organization that provides a wide range of individualized services and supports to children with various needs and adults with developmental disabilities. This partnership has allowed the company to tap into a pool of reliable, dependable, and motivated employees.

From “Out-of-the-Box” Thinking to Good Business Practice

For Onward, reaching out to the disability community in their talent acquisition process may have started as an “out-of-the-box” approach, but it has become a “business-as-usual” solution with a proven track record. By building a relationship with KW Career Compass (the employment support division of KW Habilitation), Onward is not only accessing talent, but also the critical supports that ensure a successful employment match.

The company’s first hire through KW Career Compass was James, and they have successfully hired six more people who have a disability since then. Five employees are still working at the company, and two have left on their own to pursue a different career path.

According to Mona Varga, Onward's Warehouse Manager, "James sets an amazing example for other employees because of his productivity and work ethic. James meets and exceeds our expectations."

A Win-Win Situation for the Company and the Community

Onward sees KW Career Compass as a key partner and resource for their hiring process. The company points to the agency's work sampling process that occurs prior to a candidate joining the team as an invaluable service. A Job Coach at KW Career Compass learns the job, identifies candidates in the agency's program, and introduces them to the job through brief half day, work-sampling sessions. This process allows for the evaluation of a candidate's skills based on what the employer's needs are.

KW Career Compass has also simplified the hiring and onboarding process, and this has been a time saver for the company. Along with pre-screening and preparing candidates, the employment service provider offers on-the-job supports for the employee and their supervisors as they join the team and are trained.

And, the partnership doesn't end once the employee is hired and trained, as the agency offers other continuous services to help the employee succeed if they are assigned new tasks, their job duties change or they are promoted, etc. As a result, most of the people Onward has hired through the program end up working for the company for a long time. This strong relationship between the business and the supporting agency creates a disability inclusive hiring process that results in a win-win situation for the company and the community.

Lasting Impacts from the Partnership

But the impact of Onward's partnership with KW Career Compass reaches even further heights. The company used the example set by the inclusive hiring process to create organization-wide onboarding and training methods that resulted in overall company

improvement. Surprisingly easy to implement, these methods include tasks lists, visual reminders, work sampling, evaluation check lists and job coaching/ personalized support. As a result, employees and their managers across the organization have seen their productivity and performance increase.

The employees hired by Onward with the help of KW Career Compass are full contributors in their local community. When asked why working was important to him, Graeme, who works in the order picking and packing department said, “I wanted to have my own independence. I wanted a place of my own, and I knew that I needed a full-time job to be able to support myself.”

After a year of employment with Onward, Graeme fulfilled his goal. He lives independently, works in a job he loves and has pride in being a contributor to his local economy.

Partnering with KW Career Compass is one reason why Onward has been able to meet the growing demand for its products. However, perhaps the biggest accomplishment Onward’s employees take pride in is supporting those in their community who simply need a chance to show what they can do. And in doing so, they are also making some new life-long friends along the way.

Numbers you need to know: manufacturing sector

Manufacturing is a growing source of employment, particularly in mid-sized cities and smaller communities. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada’s manufacturers were reporting labour and skills shortages. Research from the Business Development Bank of Canada in 2018 indicated that almost 40 percent of Canada’s small and medium-sized businesses were having difficulty hiring new employees¹. The situation was the same for Ontario manufacturers, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased this labour demand.

¹ Business Development Bank of Canada (2018), Labour shortage in Canada: Here to Stay.

People with disabilities are an underused resource that can help employers fill vacancies. As demonstrated by successful businesses like Onward Manufacturing Company Limited, people with disabilities have the talent, skills and enthusiasm to do the job and do it well. In fact, a study found that 90 per cent of people with disabilities rate average or better on job performance than those without.²

² Stark, Bob, Chair (2016), Employable Until Proven Otherwise. Partnership Council on Employment Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities Report