

DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

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Hiring People with disabilities fosters creativity and community at Michaels

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Michaels is a source for art supplies, crafts and framing. It's a home for creativity, but that isn't strictly limited to knitting, scrapbooking or decoupage.

Daniel Johnson, manager of the Michaels on 17 St. in Edmonton, is committed to hiring people with disabilities, something he sees as promoting creative thinking and adaptability within the company. This means looking beyond traditional assumptions of people with disabilities, thinking outside standard employee roles and seeing value in all people, regardless of ability.

Not only are they challenged to be more creative in their managerial approach, but they also are bolstered by the enthusiasm for arts and crafts: "We had a team member who worked in our classrooms and helped with the various Saturday clubs and classes that we had for children and other members. They were part and parcel of it. It created quite a bit of a buzz," says Johnson.

When asked more broadly about his own philosophies

around diversity and inclusion, he shared his mission statement for hiring at Michaels: "We like to include many diverse ranges of people. We take people from all walks of life. We work with everybody, as they're all individual in their skills and abilities. Everybody has their place in the workforce and everybody has their place within a business, and that's what we aim to achieve: to keep that diversity going."

Johnson applies approaches similar to universal design in his hiring and training policies, which leads to an employment process that is accessible by nature and tailored to each person individually. "We do it exactly the same way as any other team member," Johnson says.

Both disabled and non-disabled employees are hired based on aptitude and sensibility. Every employee is trained the same way and given the resources and all the tools to do the job based on their abilities, "and then we integrate certain skills into that and allow them to grow," Johnson says.

One of the often-overlooked positive aspects of hiring

people with disabilities, especially those in client-facing positions, is that it creates visibility. This is important not only in terms of challenging assumptions around people with disabilities in the workplace, but also in making all people with disabilities feel welcome and valued in the store.

"We like to show the community that we hire team members with disabilities. That allows the freedom of the shopping customer to feel comfortable when they come in if they do have a disability," Johnson says. "They understand that we actually care about them instead of just being a customer or a number. We do care for them and we want to try and project that."

Despite contending with myths around hiring people with disabilities, Johnson was emphatic when asked what he'd say to other managers considering it.

"Do it. One hundred per cent. It's a complete win for the business, complete win for the person, complete win for the community and a complete win for the team. There's no negative, there are only positives."



Daniel Johnson, manager of the Michaels on 17 St. in Edmonton, is committed to hiring people with disabilities. "Everybody has their place in the workforce," he says. MAT SIMPSON

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Employees with disabilities encourage commitment and adaptability at Chemisphere Solutions

CLAIRE HUGHES
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

Travis Whenham is a very busy man.

As the president of cleaning compound manufacturing company Chemisphere Solutions in St. Albert, he values the commitment of his employees. This informs all of his experiences hiring people with disabilities, despite some of the negative assumptions some people make.

"Some of the stereotypical beliefs are that you hire a person with disability is that there is going to mean more work for everyone else on your staff. That's a myth," he says. "Maybe up front there's going to be a little more work for the initial training period, but after that, once the person knows their role and knows their routine, they're really reliable."

Reliable employees who are ready to work hard deserve recognition and new challenges. Whenham is a

full believer in encouraging all employees and rewarding them with new roles and additional responsibilities.

Chemisphere employee Chris Hamill, who has been with the company for eight years, runs his own department creating compounds that aid in sweeping. He is responsible for everything from mixing the compound to ordering raw materials to packaging the product and filling the order in the proper timeframe.

"Chris is one of the best employees I have, Whenham says." He basically runs the show. It just goes to show if you let people persevere and give them the support and tools they need, they'll blow you away."

The benefits of hiring people with disabilities go beyond the individuals and have an impact on the entire team. Whenham sees how his employees with disabilities work to find the best ways of doing things with regards to their access needs, which in turn rubs off on the

entire company.

"Coming here and seeing how adaptable our staff can be to overcome challenges and other situations is just unbelievable. I can attribute a lot of that to our employees with disabilities because they've got to work around and adapt the job to fit their abilities."

Whenham says, he isn't the only team member to be inspired by the way his employees with disabilities innovate to get the job done.

"Other team members see these successful and efficient ways of adapting and say 'Okay, then there's got to be a better way for me to work on my project or accomplish this task.' They learn a lot from our employees with disabilities because they're figuring it out. They're making it happen."

Asides from working hard, Whenham says it's also important for everyone to bond outside of work and have some fun.

"We're very inclusive. We



Travis Whenham (left), president of Chemisphere Solutions, with employee Chris Hamill, who has been with the company for eight years. CARA PHOTOGRAPHERS

have big Christmas parties, we do beers after work, we do an overnight summer barbecue. It's never a question of if our employees with disabilities are coming; it's how to make it possible and accessible. It's in the com-

pany culture now."

Ultimately, Chemisphere Solutions has created a kind of interdependence between able employees and those with disabilities. Theirs is a community where work and social events are made

accessible to everyone, all team members contribute to the company's emphasis on learning and adaptability, and ultimately everyone is committed, not only to work, but to diverse ways of working.

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South East -
3741 17 Street NW

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2. Make a purchase!
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