

Disabled Workers Reap Benefits From Labour Shortage

CanWest News Service

Western Canada's tight labour market is proving to be the bane of some small businesses and a blessing to others.

Recently, a Calgary pizza restaurant made headlines for temporarily shutting down because it couldn't find enough employees. It's no secret a labour shortage has hit Alberta, but for some underrepresented groups in the job market this may be the proverbial silver lining in a dark cloud.

"I think this is a good news story," says Janine Halbesma, policy analyst for the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. "Our members are hiring from unrepresented groups." Halbesma and other analysts who closely follow Alberta's labour market say small business is now pursuing new Canadians, aboriginals and those with disabilities as one strategy to address the continuing labour shortage.

"The shortage of qualified labour is our members' biggest concern," she says. "There is no silver-bullet solution to the problem." In 2005, 27 per cent of CFIB members, of whom 100,000 are national, reported "success in hiring people with disabilities," says Halbesma.

Calgary-based Belliveau Furnishings Inc. was one such company that took the innovative approach of dealing with news of a labour shortage by hiring a person with a disability.

Belliveau recently worked with the Champions Career Centre, an agency specializing in working with employers who are interested in hiring people with disabilities, to find a new employee.

"Recruitment is one of the hardest things to do in this labour market," says Dennis Belliveau, co-owner of the company.

"I've gotten a new employee from Champions." Belliveau employs a staff of 16 that turn out custom-made office furniture. The business recently turned down work because it had so many orders to fill. Belliveau says instead of hiring too many people all at once, he now plans to carefully select employees that he hopes will make a commitment to the company and its future.

Wages at the furnishings manufacturer start at \$11 to \$12 per hour and can trend upward to \$25 per hour for a skilled cabinet maker. One of Belliveau's most recent hires is Rosalie Coffey, a 30-year-old with a hearing impairment and no past work experience.

Employed at the same starting wage as every other worker at the company, she is on the job cleaning up the shop, sanding desks and being trained to veneer furniture.

Coffey responded to questions posed to her by writing down her answers.

"I like working here," she writes. "I work hard." When asked what she plans to do with the money she's earning from her first full-time job, she responds: "Pay bills and go out with my family to a restaurant and go bowling." Just six weeks on the job, Coffey has proven to be such a reliable employee that her boss says he's already anticipating hiring another person recommended by Champions Career Centre.

"It's a perfect opportunity for people with disabilities to take advantage of the labour market and learn a trade." Simonne Walsh, executive director of Champions, says her agency is being contacted more frequently by small businesses in search of reliable employees.

The workers who obtain jobs through Champions have an opportunity to participate in the economy and employers get dependable workers willing to make a long-term commitment to a company that takes a chance on them, says Walsh.

"Most employers are happy with the clients sent their way," she says. "We strive to get better at matching, but we know in the end it's the employers' choice. Employers usually find that individuals with disabilities make excellent employees. They tend to be hard working and reliable. I know that Dennis (Belliveau) has indicated that we should send him 10 more." Back at Belliveau Furnishings, Coffey has returned to her workstation, where she is happily sanding another piece of wood. When asked whether she plans to keep working with Belliveau Furnishings, Coffey just smiles and writes, "Yes, of course."

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