

From Farm to Career Field: How a Burgeoning Business is Breaking Down Barriers for People with Disabilities

A new kind of farm is not only helping to ensure we have fresh leafy produce all year long, it is also helping to break down accessibility barriers and chase away misperceptions about hiring people with disabilities.

Fieldless Farms uses renewable energy and the latest technology to ensure the perfect indoor growing and harvesting environments for its crops. This is welcome news for consumers, who have come to realize just how important domestic food security is in helping keep grocery store shelves stocked and prices reasonable in uncertain times. But, it is also great news for newcomers and people with disabilities because the farm is also growing quality, stable jobs.

While the latest agricultural tech is helping Fieldless Farms beat the cold Canadian winter, the company still needs employees to get products picked, quality-checked, packed and shipped.

From the very start of its commercial operations four years ago, the farm realized it needed to be more open-minded and inclusive to find the reliable staff that it needed. The Cornwall, Ontario-based company faced challenges in attracting and retaining staff during the pandemic – just like many other businesses. So, it turned to an Ottawa-based rehabilitation and job-matching organization for support.

“We made sure to talk to all the local organizations that could assist with staff recruitment, training, and retention,” said Patrick Knowles, Fieldless Farm’s Director of Market Development and Strategy. “We turned to the Performance Plus Rehabilitative Care Inc. (PPRC) company for support. Today, about 20 per cent of our workforce identify as having a disability.”

PPRC is a bilingual rehabilitation company that serves as a coach, facilitator and trainer for both employers and job seekers. Director of Rehabilitation, Linda Simpson, and the entire PPRC team – which includes a growing number of persons with disabilities – are masters at matchmaking. They want to ensure a sustainable win-win for all involved.

“From the very start, Linda and her team have always made a sincere effort to truly understand our business – they walk the site to get a real sense of the roles and responsibilities which we are looking to fill,” said Knowles. “They will not put forward someone whom they are not certain will be a good fit for the job.”

With PPRC’s candidates, Fieldless Farms doesn’t face the challenges it does with other prospective hires who just don’t show up or stick with the job.

“It really helps our business to have a partner like PPRC who will help us recruit reliable people who will stay with us,” added Knowles. “PPRC knows its clients and their

capabilities. That makes it easy for a small business like ours without a large HR program to successfully tap into this part of the labour force.”

Simpson says it’s all about finding the right fit for employer and jobseeker and ensuring that both parties are prepared and confident about their new relationship. This includes supporting businesses with the education that will make them more informed about disabilities and removing barriers in the workplace, as well as addressing any other concerns an employer may have.

“The most important thing is to treat others how you want to be treated – with respect and dignity,” said Simpson. “Listen and inquire about their accommodation needs and collaborate with that individual.”

Simpson says PPRC has learned that over time, “collaboration with the person with a disability is the key to success, so we can source out what that person needs. In most cases, there are very few costs related to accommodation in the workplace.”

And the relationship and support for everyone involved continue long after the employee is hired says Knowles, “We are really excited to keep working with PPRC as our business grows.”

Myth: workplace accommodations are always expensive

One of the most persistent myths that many employers believe is that it is costly to accommodate employees with disabilities. In fact, according to employers participating in a [recent study](#) by the Job Accommodation Network – a service from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy – about 50 per cent of accommodations cost employers absolutely nothing to make, about 43 per cent of employers experienced just a one-time cost, and only about 7 per cent of accommodations resulted in an ongoing, annual cost to the company. Furthermore, of those accommodations that did have a one-time cost, the average one-time expenditure for the employer was US\$300.

About PPRC

PPRC’s services are aimed at public and private sector employers of all sizes, as well as persons with disabilities – including newcomers to Canada – with any level of education. This includes individuals who may already have experience or skills in a specific field but need advice on how to return to work or start a new career while managing their disability.

PPRC also provides fee-based Disability Awareness and Etiquette Training across Canada. Visit www.pprc.ca to learn more.