

Changes to government policy could enable SMEs to deliver effective and meaningful workplace inclusion programs



By Ling Huang

Ling Huang is the co-founder and CEO of Edmonton-based Technology North, which helps companies digitize documents and files while also providing employment for people on the autism spectrum.

Published on April 20, 2022

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Canada has record-low unemployment along with record-high job vacancies. At first glance, this doesn't seem a problem, until you realize the issues underlying the statistics.

The country is literally running out of workers. In every industry, businesses are facing significant labour shortages. The situation has gotten to the point where economists are questioning Canada's ability to recover economically in the post-COVID world.

According to Statistics Canada, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) together accounted for 88.5 percent of total employment in 2019. It is imperative to mobilize SMEs so they can lead innovation and economic growth in the post-COVID recovery.

Now, more than ever, policymakers have to take action to address both discouraged and under-utilized labour before the nation's momentum in growth comes to a halt.

There are many ways to deal with an issue like this. I will refer to only one approach that I am familiar with: employment revitalization programs and the push for inclusion in the workplace.

In 2014, I asked myself a question: What would my autistic son's life look like after high school? After many years of research and experience, the answers are troubling.

To research the issue further and to create change, during the last few years I've worked with national funding agencies, provincial governments, career colleges and Canadian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to create jobs for autistic youth.



I've learned many things through navigating bureaucracy and contracts. But the main realization I came to was that most current employment and support programs suffer from the same maladies, including:

- duplicated programs funded by different levels of government with no oversight;
- no funding for outcome incentives (i.e., making sure results last); and
- a significant lack of interest or funding from participating businesses.

All levels of governments in Canada spend combined billions of dollars per year on training, placement, job coaching and employment readiness – all for questionable returns. And for once, the federal government isn't solely to blame.

Any large-scale employment project for “outlier” communities, such as the neurodiverse, Indigenous peoples, or any population that requires more effort to train and teach, needs the proper infrastructure support and cost incentives to make sure it actually happens.

There have been many incidents in my career where certain actors completely wasted large sums of money under the guise of so-called research without any way to measure outcomes, and I'm certain it's happening in other areas as well.

If we want to make sure we achieve true inclusivity and diversity of mind and culture, then we've still got a long road ahead of us.

One of the fundamental issues with the current situation is that the attention and funding are going to all the wrong places.

For example, most of the funding aimed at neurodiversity and inclusion is limited to NGOs and service providers. Businesses are excluded as lead applicants for funding, which shuts the door for the majority of businesses to meaningfully participate in neurodiversity development and practice.

Without allowing nearly 90 percent of the employers in Canada access to any incentive from the substantial amount of “workplace inclusion” funding available, what meaningful inclusion can be achieved?

Changes needed in business “mindset” and government policy

At Technology North, the research and autism employment company I co-founded, we have learned some valuable lessons. In order to create meaningful employment for youth on the autism spectrum, not only do businesses require different logistics, they also need a different mindset, motivation and commitment.

Businesses and other organizations offering inclusion programs need to:

- commit to an inclusion project based on a clearly defined business case that promotes the strengths and capabilities of autistic workers;



- ensure program sustainability before committing to an inclusion program; and
- make the wellbeing of autistic employees and family involvement critical to the ongoing success of the program.

Some government policy changes are needed that could motivate SMEs to actively participate in innovation and neurodiversity development, including:

- a funding policy that allows SMEs to be the lead applicant in social development and innovation;
- a procurement policy that includes social costs and social benefits of proposals compared to “best-price” offering;
- emphasis on the sustained outcomes of any projects – accountability, in other words; and
- encouragement of experiential learning projects.

Canada just can't rely on obvious and simple targets like employment statistics and general inclusion initiatives; we have to build the comprehensive and integrated infrastructure for any initiative to succeed. One wouldn't build a house on a foundation of sand, so why are we treating our economy the same way?

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