



Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

Success stories

Ontario Public Service

A Canadian case study in diversity and inclusion

July 2016

Ontario Public Service: A Canadian success story in diversity and inclusion

By Brenda van Ginkel, Associate, with research by Andre Gordon, Research Associate. Thanks to the Inclusion Unit of the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services for the Government of Ontario, for talking with us about their initiative with ServiceOntario.

Reducing mental health's stigma for more inclusive workplaces

It's widely acknowledged that more sick days are a result of mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and depression than other health issues. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, "Mental illnesses cost Canadian employers billions of dollars in absenteeism or sick days, 'presenteeism' (coming to work, even when the employee can't work well), disability and other benefits, and lost productivity."

Yet the social stigma that exists for mental health (and illness) often means that related issues are not easily discussed among managers and employees. And though there are more programs addressing inclusion for people with disabilities and public awareness of mental health is growing, this stigma affects productivity and performance, and ultimately, customer care.

ServiceOntario set out to do something about that. As part of the Ontario Public Service (OPS), and part of the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, ServiceOntario is responsible for delivering services on behalf of government. The organization acts as a gateway to many of the services provided by the Ontario government for the businesses and people of the province. We talked with the Inclusion Unit for the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services about how they created the strategy and initiatives that helped the people within ServiceOntario talk about mental health and create workplaces that are safe and inclusive.

Supporting an organizational approach for mental health

In 2012, the Inclusion Unit launched an Inclusive Leadership series for those in management and leadership roles at ServiceOntario, with three modules addressing issues and attitudes in the workplace and one module specifically dedicated to mental health. This mandatory training was offered face-to-face in its first year, with learning materials published online and subsequently folded into the on-boarding process for ServiceOntario's newly hired managers.

In 2014, ServiceOntario wanted to go deeper by developing its own mental health strategy, recognizing the impact that mental health could have on employees and their ability to serve customers in a manner consistent with the organization's vision, which was articulated as, "to meet or exceed customer expectations with our service, solutions, leadership and people... every time."

The Inclusion Unit launched the mental health strategy at the same time as an OPS-wide initiative, *Healthy Workplace, Healthy Mind*, aligning the Inclusion Unit's strategy with the wider government initiative. They appointed a Mental Health Champion for ServiceOntario to promote participation in mental health events and activities, raise awareness through open dialogue and discussion and to remind managers and staff of OPS accommodation processes.

The mental health action plan for ServiceOntario focused on creating a culture conducive to positive attitudes towards mental health by:

- Increasing awareness of mental health within ServiceOntario;
- Using education and communication to reduce fear, stigma and discrimination;
- Providing appropriate workplace accommodations as needed.

The Inclusion Unit also leveraged the OPS-wide initiative in developing an educational and knowledge-based program for all Ministry of Government and Consumer Services employees, *Mental Health Works*, to promote awareness of mental health and the associated stigma and to support employees with resources. An overall wellbeing initiative was also piloted in ServiceOntario with resources to address health for body and mind, which is now being expanded to more ServiceOntario employees.

From research to planning

ServiceOntario's mental health strategy and action plan was based on research and identifying the challenges and gaps to prioritize programming. Research began with learning what was happening in its workplaces and how that fit into larger trends, with analysis from:

- Focus groups with managers to identify challenges;
- Anecdotal learnings about trends and how staff are doing from casual conversations at events, branch meetings and divisional meetings;
- Customer feedback through the website, phone calls and email – specifically, complaints identifying issues of diversity and accessibility;
- Tracking national trends of growing or decreasing employee-related workplace issues;
- Surveying managers to assess awareness for their obligations to address inclusion across all categories, and find out how they're incorporating accessibility.

The biggest gaps that emerged were around knowledge and trust: managers and employees didn't know enough about mental health in the workplace and employees were afraid to talk with

managers about mental health issues. Keeping the research and strategic goals employee-centric was an effective way to open the dialogue and cultivate trust. The strategy for ServiceOntario featured a vision statement for mental health in a psychologically healthy workplace where:

- “ 1. Employees feel safe to confide in their managers whenever mental health becomes a struggle or concern.
2. Managers handle disclosures of mental health struggles or concerns with sensitivity, hold disclosures in confidence, and involve the employee in identifying any accommodation that might be appropriate.
3. Co-workers are supportive of staff who may be struggling or appear to be struggling with mental health concerns by contributing to a psychologically safe workplace, maintaining positive relationships with their co-workers, and respecting accommodations that are put in place for any staff for any reason.”

The mental health strategy supported a culture with positive attitudes towards mental health with initiatives to build awareness, reduce fear, stigma and discrimination, and to provide workplace accommodations as needed.

Organizing for education, awareness and accommodation

The Inclusion Unit positioned mental health considerations parallel to other health issues to normalize it and help lift its stigma in the workplace. Delivering on the vision for managers and staff to feel comfortable talking together about mental health, the Inclusion Unit developed *Mental Health Works* workshops to enhance communications around mental health as it applied to the workplace and to improve awareness of the policies, procedures and resources that were in place.

While *Mental Health Works* programming created a better understanding of mental health in the workplace for managers, it also built trust among employees that ServiceOntario workplaces were safe for discussing mental health with managers or co-workers. The workshops covered issues such as support from co-workers – what that looked like and what it meant when a co-worker was suffering from a mental health issue. They also explained how accommodations could help a person work better and described processes across the OPS for accommodations.

The sessions covered welcoming employees back from mental health-related sick leave, so that people returning to work would be treated like those returning to work from other health issues and feel included, not marginalized. The workshops also guided employees to other resources.

ServiceOntario’s diversity and accessibility programs are designed to help managers and employees feel engaged and valued at work. “We know this initiative is working because our staff are coming forward and speaking more openly about mental health issues. Participants at our workshops tell us they feel more empowered to have these conversations, and feel more equipped to assist staff who may be struggling or who may be returning to work from a mental health-related leave,” says the head of the Inclusion Unit, Tracy Odell.

Responsive processes

ServiceOntario's mental health initiatives were designed with responsive processes in training, compliance and evaluation. When the *Mental Health Works* workshops were evaluated, 97% of respondents said their awareness about mental health in the workplace was improved. However, Ontario's geographic spread were a challenge for delivery due to limited resources for in-person training and travel. So the Inclusion Unit brought train-the-trainer workshops to managers in their Customer Care Division so they could deliver the workshop to staff across the province.

Online accessibility training processes were responsive as well. When it came to measuring effectiveness for the online training, the Inclusion Unit followed up by testing managers who had taken the modules on accessibility for their compliance with accessibility requirements.

The effectiveness of initiatives supporting accessibility compliance is also measured in annual spot checks at randomly-selected offices. Managers and their staff are tested on their knowledge of the expectations, requirements and procedures related to accessibility. The results guide the Customer Care Division and the Inclusion Unit on performance and help them adjust for the following year.

Tactics that made a difference

ServiceOntario has seen change happen from directing attention to mental health. Awareness about mental health has improved the conversation within the workplace among managers and employees. The Inclusion Unit identified two key tactics that increased employee engagement.

Be open to hearing hard truths when planning

The Inclusion Unit learned that, while it's difficult to process negative feedback when intentions are good, it's important to have an open mind about how employees are feeling and behaving, and to be mindful in planning for programming that's effective. When *Mental Health Works* was delivered to more than 1,500 ServiceOntario employees, the interactive presentation included activities that encouraged participants to ask questions, share their opinions and challenge the status quo. The Inclusion Unit learned through the presentation sessions and the post-presentation survey that employees experiencing mental health challenges or supporting loved ones with mental health challenges felt that the interactive approach of the presentation was therapeutic in itself. The workshop cultivated discussions for people to be able to openly talk about their challenges, some for the first time.

The advice from the Inclusion Unit for others planning initiatives is to be brave enough to invite truths and value hearing what employees say they experience. Listening to employees and being thoughtful about what is shared helped the team adapt appropriate programming that addressed the needs of employees experiencing mental health challenges who wouldn't openly discuss their challenges due to stigma. After completing the workshop, the Inclusion Unit noted that many participants reported that they felt more comfortable talking about their challenges, knowing that they could get help from management.

Be responsive

The Inclusion Unit also noted that when employees have shared how they have felt, it's important to demonstrate that what they said has been heard, and to be prepared to act on what people have said. It was as a result of what the Inclusion Unit was hearing from employees, for instance, that Inclusive Leadership training became mandatory for managers.

The Ministry has seen that barriers and challenges for inclusion can be different from one office to another. For workplaces where trust among employees had eroded, workshops on civility in the workplace helped groups move forward on issues of accessibility and inclusion.

Reduced stigma for mental health

Because of the positive effects of the Inclusion Unit's initiatives, their role has expanded from focusing on mental health within ServiceOntario to all staff across the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services.

ServiceOntario is seeing that improved employee engagement about mental health is helping to evolve how it is addressed in the workplace. They are noticing the stigma gradually lift, which they credit to having brought diversity and inclusion best practices into public service workplaces. The organization has shown that by making it easier to talk about mental health, its workplaces are being transformed with a more inclusive culture to become more welcoming to work at, more productive, with improved service for customers.

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The Success story initiative

There is astonishingly little published that shines a light on diversity and inclusion successes in Canada, though there are many, across a wide range of organizations. Case studies referenced by trainers and leadership tend to be reporting on different countries, cultures, political and economic settings.

The goal of this initiative is to support diversity and inclusion leadership with stories that are relevant to what's happening now, here in Canada. By sharing their stories, we celebrate the successes of Canadian organizations while contributing to learning for everyone that cares about diversity and inclusion.

The employers who have developed initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion as priorities in the workplace are responding to an increasingly competitive economy that's responsive to the diversity of employees – and the country. We are grateful to those who have participated in interviews.

This series of case studies will be published through 2016. Subscribing to our monthly newsletter at ccdi.ca will keep you updated with the latest case studies, which will all be posted online at ccdi.ca/successstories. For more information, contact mail@ccdi.ca.

The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion

The CCDI has a mission to help the organizations we work with be inclusive, free of prejudice and discrimination – and to generate the awareness, dialogue and action for people to recognize diversity as an asset and not an obstacle. Through the research, reports and toolkits we develop and our workshops, events and workplace consultations, we're helping Canadian employers understand their diversity, plan for it and create inclusion.

CCDI's leadership has a proven model that's cultivated trust as an impartial third party. Our expertise is focused on the topics of inclusion that are relevant in Canada now and the regional differences that shape diversity.

A charitable organization that thinks like a business, we have created a niche with our innovative research technology and data analysis that brings a deeper understanding of Canadian diversity demographics and mindsets at any given moment.

CCDI is grateful for the support of Employer Partners across Canada. For enquiries, contact Susan Rogers, Chief Client Officer, Susan.Rogers@ccdi.ca or (416) 968-6520, ext 103.

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