

Case Study: A Grocery Retailer's Journey as an Inclusive Business

ABOUT ODEN BUSINESS CASE STUDIES

The Ontario Disability Employment Network (ODEN) is a professional network of employment service providers united to increase employment opportunities for people who have a disability. ODEN curates and develops case studies as real-life examples of success stories and positive employment outcomes.

Case studies are great knowledge resources for gleaning ideas and insights that people can apply in their own operations and with their teams. ODEN case studies are divided into five categories: **(i) Partnership & Collaboration, (ii) Program Model & Promising Practices, (iii) High Performing Employment Service Providers, (iv) Inclusive Business, and (v) Organizational Change Management**. Each category provides valuable insights for employment service providers and businesses to enhance their capacity to achieve inclusive hiring for people who have a disability.

This case study falls under the category of **Inclusive Business**.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study highlights the disability inclusion journey of a regional grocery store in Ontario that has embedded inclusive hiring into its workforce strategy through strong community partnerships and operational innovation.

Through collaboration with a local employment service provider (ESP), the store has implemented accessible recruitment practices, flexible onboarding approaches, and workplace supports that enable employees who have intellectual disabilities to succeed.

The partnership provides the store with a dependable talent pipeline, job coaching support, and ongoing collaboration that strengthens internal capacity for inclusive leadership. These practices have helped address operational needs, improve workforce reliability, and enhance employee retention while building a more inclusive workplace culture.

The store's experience demonstrates the clear business case for inclusive hiring. By aligning job design with employee strengths, adapting workplace processes, and leveraging community partnerships, the organization has improved operational efficiency, strengthened workforce performance, and created sustainable employment outcomes. This case study provides practical insights for employers seeking to integrate inclusive hiring into their workforce strategies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Inclusive hiring is a strategic workforce practice.** It strengthens workforce reliability, retention, and overall operational performance.
- **Community partnerships build sustainable talent pipelines.** Collaboration with employment service providers supports recruitment, onboarding, and long-term employee success.
- **Flexible job design improves efficiency.** Carving out tasks and aligning roles with employee strengths enables better resource allocation and workforce effectiveness.

- **Leadership commitment drives organizational change.** Inclusive workplace culture grows through intentional leadership and continuous learning.
- **Accessible processes support better business outcomes.** Adjustments to recruitment, onboarding, and workplace practices reduce barriers and improve operational results.

INTRODUCTION

The organization featured in this case study is part of a large Canadian grocery retail network with a significant national presence. Guided by a strong commitment to community, respect and customer service, the organization integrates inclusive values into its operations and workplace culture.

Employment is widely recognized as a key factor in health, well-being, and community participation. By supporting access to meaningful work for people who have disabilities, the organization contributes to workforce inclusion, economic participation, and stronger communities.

At the national level, the company has incorporated diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) into its corporate strategy, recognizing that its commitment to DE&I shapes organizational culture and drives business success by fostering fairness, openness, and respect for diverse perspectives. Accessibility is also reflected in both workplace practices and customer-facing initiatives designed to create more inclusive environments.

At the store level, leadership has translated these broader commitments into practice by fostering an inclusive workplace culture and building strong partnerships with community organizations. Store leadership has supported workforce development and inclusive employment practices while contributing to innovation within the grocery sector. A central component of the store's approach is its collaboration with a local employment service provider that supports people who have intellectual and developmental disabilities through job coaching, employer engagement, and ongoing workplace support. Through its partnership with the ESP, they have implemented accessible hiring practices and supportive workplace environments that enable employees to succeed.

This case study explores the store's journey toward disability inclusion and examines the impact of inclusive employment on workforce performance, workplace practices, and business outcomes. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with store leadership and reflects the experience of implementing inclusive hiring in a fast-paced retail environment.

THE JOURNEY TOWARD DISABILITY INCLUSION

The store's disability inclusion journey began through the experience of existing employees who had intellectual disabilities and made meaningful contributions to the workplace. Leadership observed the positive impact these employees had on team performance and customer experience.

Customers developed strong connections with employees and expressed appreciation for their presence, as a paid employee and full economic contributors, demonstrating both cultural and operational benefits.

These experiences inspired store leadership to expand inclusive hiring efforts and explore partnerships with community organizations. Earlier exposure to community-based initiatives also influenced this direction, reinforcing the importance of creating more accessible employment pathways.

BUILDING A TALENT PIPELINE THROUGH COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

A central component of Sobeys Simcoe's inclusive hiring strategy is its collaboration with Employment Service Provider and its employment support program. This partnership supports recruitment, candidate preparation, job coaching, and ongoing workplace assistance.

The ESP program provides the store with access to qualified candidates while ensuring employees receive appropriate supports to succeed. Job coaches provide hands-on guidance, reinforce training, and support employee confidence and skill development. They also support managers by sharing disability inclusion best practices, including strategies for conducting more accessible and inclusive interviews. This collaboration strengthens workforce planning, reduces hiring barriers, and supports long-term employee success.

"They're my saving grace. I wouldn't do it without them."

— Store Manager

The relationship is built on trust, ongoing communication, and shared responsibility for employment outcomes. Store leadership relies on the ESP for guidance and problem-solving, while collaborative activities such as employer participation in classroom sessions help prepare candidates for workplace expectations.

This collaborative model reduces hiring barriers, strengthens employee outcomes, and supports sustainable inclusion.

INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT AND HIRING PRACTICES

The store has adapted its recruitment process to make it more accessible and inclusive. These changes include:

- Asking candidates about accommodation needs early in the hiring process
- Allowing job coaches, family members, or support persons to participate in interviews, particularly for youth who have a disability and may be entering the workforce for the first time.
- Creating more flexible interview environments
- Focusing on candidate skills, strengths, and potential rather than prior experience

This approach expands the available talent pool while supporting workforce effectiveness. Although some managers initially expressed concerns about time requirements and productivity, job coaching and ongoing support helped address these concerns and build confidence in inclusive hiring practices.

ONBOARDING AND WORKPLACE INTEGRATION

Onboarding practices emphasize flexibility, individualized support, and skill development. Key supports include job coaching, repetition-based learning, gradual task progression, flexible role assignment, and ongoing communication with ESP staff.

The store uses a “task stacking” approach that allows employees to master responsibilities progressively. In some cases, employees are reassigned to roles that better match their strengths, improving both performance and confidence.

These practices improve workplace effectiveness by adapting processes to support employee success without requiring significant structural changes.

BUSINESS OUTCOMES AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT

The store has observed several positive business outcomes:

- High employee retention among hires who have disabilities
- Strong reliability and attendance
- Dependable performance
- Improved task allocation and operational efficiency

“I don’t have sick calls; I don’t have unexcused absences... they’re very dependable.”

— Manager

Employees often perform routine tasks that allow specialized staff to focus on their core responsibilities, improving workflow efficiency and resource allocation. The store also reports strong employee loyalty, contributing to workforce stability.

THE VALUE OF FLEXIBLE JOB DESIGN

The store has demonstrated that inclusive hiring can directly address operational needs while strengthening workforce performance. Leadership identifies tasks that are routine or difficult to staff and designs roles that align with employee strengths and business priorities.

Many of these tasks are typically part of broader job descriptions. By carving out specific responsibilities and reallocating them as focused roles, the store is able to better match work to individual strengths while making more effective use of employee skill sets. Examples include assigning routine production tasks such as food preparation or product packaging. This targeted job design improves efficiency, allows specialized staff to focus on specialized work, and supports more effective use of resources.

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PROJECT SEARCH AND WORK READINESS

The store has also hired graduates from structured work readiness programs, such as Project SEARCH, that prepare people who have disabilities for employment through practical experience and skills training.

Graduates of these types of programs often demonstrate strong communication skills, transferable abilities, and high degree of readiness for workplace expectations. Their preparation enabled faster onboarding and smoother integration into operational roles, highlighting the value of structured work readiness programs in strengthening workforce capacity.

LESSONS LEARNED: INCLUSION AS A CONTINUOUS PROCESS

The store's experience demonstrates several key lessons for organizations seeking to implement inclusive hiring practices:

- **Inclusive hiring strengthens workforce performance.** Employees demonstrate strong reliability, retention, and engagement, contributing to operational stability.
- **Leadership commitment drives organizational change.** Store leadership plays a critical role in building inclusive workplace culture and supporting ongoing learning.
- **Community partnerships enable sustainable outcomes.** Employment service providers offer expertise, candidate preparation, and workplace supports that reduce hiring barriers and support long-term success.
- **Flexible job design improves operational efficiency.** Carving out specific tasks and aligning roles with employee strengths supports better resource allocation and workforce effectiveness.
- **Inclusive practices evolve through continuous improvement.** Ongoing communication, adaptation, and collaboration strengthen organizational capacity for inclusion.

The store continues to focus on developing employee skills, expanding inclusive practices, and strengthening internal processes that support long-term workforce effectiveness.

LOOKING AHEAD

The store plans to continue expanding inclusive hiring practices and supporting employee development. Leadership aims to create opportunities for career progression and enhance recruitment and onboarding processes.

"We won't stop."

— Store Manager

The store's ongoing partnership with community organizations will remain central to its approach, ensuring continued growth and improvement in disability inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This case study demonstrates that inclusive hiring is a practical and effective workforce strategy that strengthens organizational performance while supporting an inclusive workplace environment. Through

leadership commitment, community partnership, and flexible job design, the store has improved operational efficiency, enhanced workforce reliability, and created sustainable employment opportunities.

It also highlights how employers can address operational challenges, align work with employee strengths, and build internal capacity for inclusive leadership through collaboration with community partners. This experience offers a practical roadmap for organizations seeking to integrate inclusive hiring into their workforce strategies and demonstrates the measurable value of inclusive employment for business outcomes.

If you have any questions regarding the information presented in this case study, please email us at info@odenetwork.com.