



Transcript

Episode 45: Bringing Project SEARCH to your Community

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Dean Askin 00:02

This is You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D, the podcast that explores the power of inclusion in business, in employment, in education, and in our communities, and why disability is an important part of the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility conversation with your hosts, Amy Widdows and Dean Askin. Hello there, welcome to the show. This is episode 45 of You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D. This episode brings us to the halfway mark of our 2026 season. Wherever you're joining us from, and whatever your local time is right now, whether you're tuned in on your commute to work or while you enjoy an afternoon or evening cup of tea, thanks for being here with us. Hi there, I'm Dean Askin, and we've got a youthful show for you this episode. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs estimates that worldwide there are between 180 million and 202 million youth who have a disability. Here in Canada alone, well over half a million youth who have a disability, 546,410 to be more precise. That's the figure from Statistics Canada.

Ingrid Muschta 01:20

Hello there, I'm Ingrid Muschta, sitting in for Amy Widdows here at the other side of the mic. It's great to be here. I've really been looking forward to this episode because what we're talking about, well, this show is something I'm really passionate about, and the topic of this show is something that I'm really passionate about.

Dean Askin 01:38

Well, hey, it's great to have you in the co-host chair for the first time, Ingrid. First time co-hosting. You can't spell inclusion without a D for you. But I know you're no stranger to talking to audiences in webinars and in-person presentations. By the way, Ingrid's the director of special projects and innovation for the Ontario Disability Employment Network.

Ingrid Muschta 01:58

And now I am a podcaster too, Dean. You mentioned those half a million Canadian youth who have a disability. Well, over 100,000 of them are what's known as need-that is, N-E-E-T, not in employment,

not in education, or training of any kind-and of those, well over 83,000 have been identified by Statistics Canada as potential employees.

Dean Askin 02:28

Throw in the fact that there is a significant labor shortage in Canada, especially in the trades, in healthcare, in agriculture and food, and in the transportation sector. And those 83,400 meet Canadian youth who have a disability and are considered potential employees. While they kind of become crucial for businesses to consider when they're recruiting and hiring, especially when there's a labor shortage across multiple sectors.

Ingrid Muschta 02:55

There is a unique program called Project SEARCH, and is playing a significant role in helping businesses make sure they have up and upcoming talent to fill the roles that they need, while at the same time training youth who have a disability to succeed in the workplace.

Dean Askin 03:13

We're going to find out all about Project SEARCH in this conversation, but in a nutshell, to set the stage, high school students spend their last 10 months of school immersed at a host business, getting hands-on experience and training. Project SEARCH was started in 1996 at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center as a recruitment and retention strategy. There are now over 750 Project SEARCH sites worldwide and 29 in Canada.

Ingrid Muschta 03:40

In fact, Project SEARCH was brought to Canada in 2011. Holland Bloorview Children's Rehabilitation Hospital in Toronto and the Ontario Disability Employment Network co-lead Project SEARCH Canada. Holland Blue View is the coordinating organization, while Odin spreads the word to businesses in Ontario and across the country about Project Search.

Dean Askin 04:04

Now, why is it so important for businesses to get involved in Project SEARCH? What's the ripple effect in a community when they do, and how can businesses bring Project SEARCH to the communities they serve? Keep listening. Some insightful answers to all these questions and more coming from our guest this episode.

Carolyn McDougall 04:23

That's right. Sitting on the other side of the mic is Carolyn McDougall. She's here from Holland Bloorview Children's Rehabilitation Hospital. She's the Ontario and Canada coordinator for Project Search Canada. Carolyn was on the show last season for episode 37, that was a conversation about another youth employment topic focused on a report done by Holland Bloorview about a funding model for employment for youth who have a disability. Carolyn, welcome back to You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D. Thanks for being here to share your insights about the business importance of Project SEARCH Canada.

Carolyn McDougall 05:04

Thanks, Ingrid and Dean. Happy to be here.

Speaker 1 05:06

Well, let's get started. Question number one for you. Let's take a look at this from the context of the fact that there is a labor shortage in Canada. From that business perspective, why is Project SEARCH so important?

Carolyn McDougall 05:23

Yes, Canadian businesses are reporting current and also anticipated labor shortages. So we know that employers are interested in new sources of talent and in retaining skilled employees. At the same time, people with disabilities are an underutilized talent source, so programs like Project SEARCH help connect job seekers and employers. That benefits individuals, organizations, and communities. That's why it's so important.

Carolyn McDougall 05:55

And it sounds, or we know, that this is a three-step model. So tell us, and anyone else who's tuning in right now to listen, and who may never have heard about Project SEARCH, how that model works, and why is it so effective for employers who have talent needs and roles to fill, and then follow up with what is that makes this model so successful?

Carolyn McDougall 06:21

All right. Well, as you mentioned, Project SEARCHMH did start as an inclusive workforce strategy at an employer at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center in the mid '90s. It's been so successful for them as a training model that they now have more than 80 employees who train through the Project SEARCH program at their own location, and it the the model just also I think made sense to other businesses and to other education and employment partners. So it has spread across the United States and and other countries. The three parts that you mention of the Project SEARCH program model are number one training, number two job development and matching, and number three employment support. To give a little more information, the the model specifically is aiming to level the playing field by providing training opportunities for youth with intellectual disabilities or autism in a host business organization, so this is a group of youth who often face barriers to getting early work experiences and therefore building their employability skills. So the host business brings in a cohort of youth who do internships in three different departments across 10 months. Each person then ends up building more than 700 hours of skills and experiences. The business hosting the program often hires some of the graduates, and others move on to jobs with other employers in the local community. So the success really comes from the quality of the training immersed at the host business, and then it's combined with built-in support from local organization with expertise in in education and also one with expertise in disability inclusive employment. The people who train finish the program with the skills that the employers and their communities need, and the employers themselves feel supported and enabled.

Dean Askin 08:33

You know, I'm I'm curious. I'm going to jump in here for a minute because I want to satisfy my curiosity here. What's the biggest challenge in getting businesses to to participate in in Project SEARCH?

Carolyn McDougall 08:48

I think the challenge is as is something of a general one to that organizations sometimes express around disability inclusion and confidence. So we know that many organizations are interested in diversifying their talent pipelines, and also interested in inclusive workplace culture, because they know that it engages their employees and and therefore their customers, leading to overall better business performance. But still, we often hear that businesses aren't 100% sure how to start to be more inclusive of workers with intellectual disabilities and autism, so Project SEARCH is providing a starting point that they can build from with confidence. There's two ways to get involved: either as a host business for the 10-month training program, and/or as an employer who hires from the local Project SEARCH talent pool. Either way, there's proven tools and built-in expert support.

Dean Askin 09:46

You know, obviously, you know, you've got to go out and talk to businesses and and get them interested in this. When you do those presentations and talk with business owners and business leaders, whether it's you know a leader at a big business or a. Small business owner, when you talk to them about getting their companies involved in Project SEARCH, what's the usual initial reaction? And I'm wondering, you know, are some businesses skeptical, and how do things change from day one at a host business by the end of the 10 months that the interns are are there?

Carolyn McDougall 10:18

When we talk with potential host businesses about Project SEARCH we do share some several business benefits. Of course, the potential talent pipeline that we've been discussing is one of them. I find though that leaders are more interested in the impacts in terms of employee engagement and disability confidence because the host business is making training internships available across a range of departments, one common question initially is how busy workers will react to being involved as mentors and managers to a new group of interns. But we find that overwhelmingly, organizations that host Project SEARCH programs report high levels of interest and satisfaction amongst the staff who are providing the opportunities to the Project SEARCH interns. I think that's just because it's really rewarding to see young people learn and grow, and and kind of witness their that growth over the course of the 10 months, and then host businesses also tell us that they learn a lot about disability inclusive practices, kind of one intern and one department and team at a time through project search, and that that ends up benefiting many people. So, for example, a small change in the way that daily duties are communicated to a team can make a big difference to everyone. Maybe adding a list to a bulletin board, as well as assigning them verbally in the morning team meeting, means that more than one person on the team can go back and check what's coming next for them on the written list.

Ingrid Muschta 11:56

I find I'm going to jump in in the conversation as well because I I find interesting your comment about the reward that comes from witnessing youth develop. So I'm trying to understand, and maybe you can provide us with insight here, Carolyn. How does Project SEARCH build relationship between that local business and their educational community? You know, the entire school ecosystem. What is that relationship building like?

Carolyn McDougall 12:28

So to start any new location of Project SEARCH is definitely about building some collaborations, and it can be really exciting. So we have been so far mainly discussing the host business angle, and that's for sure a key partner. But each cohort of interns requires a teacher and skills trainers who also are immersed alongside the interns at the host business, and it usually is a local school system that's providing the teacher. You mentioned this program can operate both as a final year of high school and sometimes also can operate for young adults still affiliated educationally but finished high school, but so generally overall education is the second key partner, and then there also needs to be expertise from the employment services sector. So another important partner is a local organization that provides employment services for employers and job seekers with disabilities. That employment organization is often the one assigning staff who act as skills trainers or job coaches for the interns during their 10-month training. These are also the experts who support graduates as they match with local employers to start their careers, so together the training environment at the host business and the expert guidance of the teacher and the skills trainer produces the well-trained graduates and high levels of employer satisfaction.

Ingrid Muschta 13:54

It's definitely a community ecosystem that surrounds the the person. There are some big corporate names for businesses that are participating in Project Search, but are most of the businesses that participate would you classify them as large organization, or you know should we also be talking to those small and medium sized business owners and operators who are currently listening to this conversation.

Carolyn McDougall 14:25

The size of the host business does depend sort of on the size of the community, but regardless of that geography, it is sort of a it's a local champion business or leader in the community. Hoping it's okay to do a little name dropping and give some examples. So, right now there are Project SEARCH programs in 17 hospitals, from large teaching hospitals like Toronto's University Health Network or Winnipeg's Health Sciences Center, to regional hospitals like in Haldimand Han. Over Norfolk and Pembroke in Ontario, and there's four programs based in long-term care and retirement residences, like Sudbury's Pioneer Manor and Brantford's Saint Joseph's Life Care. There's two programs in post-secondary education at the University of Guelph and at Windsor's Saint Clair College, and then Project Search started in Canada at Manitoba Hydro with the government of Manitoba. It's still going strong there, and there's now also a site with a municipal government at the city of Peterborough in Ontario. We have four programs based in YMCAs. So again, lots of variation in size, but one thing that they all have in common as host businesses is that they have the range of different types of departments and roles, and I guess internal functions, so that interns can train in skills that range from environmental and food services to stocking and materials management. They can learn clerical skills. Those are things that one learns within the host business, but they can be really transferable to a range of different industries that that may exist then in the local labor market. So, definitely, small and medium-sized businesses can and do recruit well-trained candidates from this talent pool, even if the interns have originally trained in in a larger local employer.

Ingrid Muschta 16:23

Yeah and I think I'm going to throw a stat in here just before Dean jumps back in here from some work that we had done ourselves here at ODE, and there are more than 370,000 small to medium-sized businesses out there in Ontario alone that could benefit from accessing this talent pool.

Dean Askin 16:43

Yeah, that's why I think the stat is like you know the it's 90. I think it's like 97.8% or 98% of small businesses are the are the are the economic you know drivers in in this country. I mean, regardless of whether we're you know talking about a small business or a large business, I'm wondering, Carolyn, how important is Project SEARCH in in shaping the inclusive culture in in business and workplaces?

Carolyn McDougall 17:14

I love talking about inclusive culture. So, yeah, we we know that 27 of Canadians have a disability. Some visible, but many not visible. And so, when organizations take intentional steps to be more disability inclusive, really the whole workforce and organization benefit. So, I can share a few examples of culture change at various levels that we've seen via the Project Search connection. At one level, managers who are involved with Project Search often say that they're more effective at training and communicating with their staff as a result of of being connected with Project Search, and I think that that makes sense. All all teams are made up of people with diverse learning styles. So the more we learn about about communicating with people with diverse learning styles, just the more effective we are. Other people have told us that they're more deliberate as a result of being involved in project search about facilitating introductions amongst team members, so that they are more intentionally fostering social inclusion and a sense of teamwork and belonging. So we can just think about how that how that grows and and and really affects engagement overall in the business. And then I think at a more organizational level, the the businesses that are involved with Project Search often identify it as an eye opener and as a starting point for change. For example, many host business organizations, as a result of being involved in Project SEARCH start to do things like examining their role descriptions to remove elements that are maybe not really essential, but just sort of historical artifacts, and that might be barriers to inclusive recruitment overall. And many consider how they can improve the way they interview by giving more information to candidates and including hands-on components in addition to interview questions that that help really get at what's really needed in the job, a lot of organizations really go on to develop strong relationships with their local employment service provider organizations, so that they can work with experts in disability accommodation and inclusion.

Dean Askin 19:33

You know, those are really significant things that that sort of evolve inside the business when when they're when they're getting involved in project search, so I mean let's look outside. You know how important you know is it you know for the community? What's the ripple effect when a local business gets involved in Project SEARCH? What's the ripple effect throughout the entire community? You mentioned you know you mentioned you know employment service. Providers a little bit, but what's the broader ripple effect of it all?

Carolyn McDougall 20:05

A couple that come to mind for me are that we often see the the host business and the education employment partner organizations collaborating on initiatives in addition to Project SEARCH in their

communities. So, for example, recently a number of the Ontario healthcare organizations came together to develop more in-depth training for managers about disability inclusive management strategies. We also see that local employers who hire from Project Search often talk to others in their professional networks, and that that brings other employers in to learn about the business benefits and the how-to's of disability inclusive employment. So that's great. I think another example I can think of is a mother of a recent graduate also talked about the fact that since her son gained employment following his training with Project SEARC, people in their family's network in their community see her son, and by extension, others with disabilities in a new way. Really see them as capable contributors to the community. So we really see inclusion growing within teams, within organizations, and and within communities as a whole.

Dean Askin 21:22

So what it's coming down to is this: this is raising awareness and helping to change attitudes and perceptions.

Carolyn McDougall 21:29

I definitely agree.

Ingrid Muschta 21:31

I'm one that likes to look at the details, Carolyn, and I'm trying to, you know, for everybody in in the podcast listening and and and and absorbing this information, what would you say is one of the most important things that the business learns along the way? You know, you've mentioned a number of things, but what would you say is the one that is the most important that they've learned over the 10 months of participating and being a Project SEARCH host?

Carolyn McDougall 22:02

I think I might have to hit two as opposed to just one. So sorry. So I do think that it is really important that project search is often a catalyst for businesses to strengthen their their collaborations and their ties with other organizations and their community. That just has so many so many spinoff benefits. But I think the another important thing that businesses learn is is how to train and include people who do have diverse learning and communication styles that relates to disability, but is beyond disability as well too in terms of diversity and inclusion. So, for example, you know managers learn in a hands-on way about how to break down tasks into systematic steps and make learning aids like checklists that really bring standard operating procedures to life and improve quality and overall performance and everybody's clarity. So you know another example would be learning about using plain and direct language to give instructions, and we really emphasize giving constructive feedback regularly and clearly. So those types of things are just improvements and enhancements to overall management and the function of businesses. They benefit all managers and all employees and make the organization that much more impactful.

Ingrid Muschta 23:18

Probably making their the work more efficient as well as they implement some very easy lift accommodations and flexibilities in how things get done. It you know Project SEARCH is a really successful program. I mean you've been talking about how or we've been talking about how globally

there are 750 sites brought into Canada in 2011, and in Ontario in 2019, with 29 sites currently engaged. Clearly, something is being done really right here. What would you say is being done correctly, and what do you think there is more room for improvement for the program. Is this a process of continuous learning and continuous improvement as well?

Carolyn McDougall 24:10

I think in answering this, firstly, one of the things that is being done right, or or that makes it really implementable and scalable, is the fact that where the program developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, it is a program that is licensed from that organization, and the license pays for training and implementation support. So that's often really attractive to the businesses that are considering hosting, and you know, in particular, large businesses. It's it's not just an idea that someone has dreamt up that's never, you know, been tried before. It actually, as you said in the introduction to this question, Ingrid, it's it's been tried and it works in 750 other locations. And there's a lot of tools and materials, right? That that that do help it get started along with the planning support. So that. That definitely is being done right, so that it is relatively easy to adopt and get going with these benefits we've been discussing. One of the current improvement initiatives that we do have on the go collectively is to improve and strengthen relationships with employers who have regional and national talent needs. When we can understand the types of roles that employers need filled and the skills that they're looking for, we want to translate that information to all the project search programs in Canada, so that each program can really be training its interns with those employer needs in mind. And at the same time, we're giving employers information about inclusive recruitment strategies and links in their local communities, so that we are increasing opportunities for Project SEARCH graduates to have have those open doors and and the the potential to demonstrate their strengths and capacities to to possible employers. Another thing we're looking at really is, I guess I would say, is scale and capacity building. We really want effective transition programs like Project SEARCH to be available all across Canada. It really requires building awareness of the model and and sometimes also figuring out the systems for partnering and funding the resources that are needed to make a program viable, so that I guess you know building awareness of the program, but the the nuances of how to make it operate in in different jurisdictions is is one of our other current priorities.

Ingrid Muschta 26:35

I think it's sorry. I was just going to say I think it goes back to that concept of making things standard somehow, but also really looking into the the nuances of each community as well,

Carolyn McDougall 26:50

for sure.

Dean Askin 26:50

I want to get a little bit personal here for a minute with you, Carolyn. I mean, you're the Ontario and Canada Project SEARCH Coordinator. I mean, for you, what's the most rewarding thing about Project Search, and you know, and what you do?

Carolyn McDougall 27:06

Yes, it is one of my main roles: talking to people about the Project SEARCH model and connecting organizations who want to bring it to their communities. So grateful for this opportunity today, telling more people about it. It is a uniquely effective model, so I do love discussing it. I do also really appreciate that the the model has you know joins different organizations from the different systems we've been discussing: business, employment, education, and in really driving towards like high employment outcomes for young people, and I think that that's something that we want to see happening more and more in Canada.

Dean Askin 27:46

Now, you mentioned this a little bit a couple of minutes ago, but I want to I want to find out a little bit more. I mean, what's your vision for Project SEARCH, and how many businesses and sites will be involved, say 510, 15 years down the road, where do you see it all going, or where do you hope it'll go?

Carolyn McDougall 28:06

Yeah, those timeframes make us think we can think big, but which we do want to. And though important to mention it, it in order to do a good job planning for a new location for Project SEARCH, it does take between nine and 12 months, ideally, to develop the partnerships and then do the implementation planning for each new program. So, kind of realistically, I hope within five years we might see another 10 to 15 project search locations in various provinces or territories, and hopefully in diverse industries. And as I said, we also are aiming to really build the network of employers who consistently seek out Project SEARCH graduates to play important roles in their organizations. So, in the longer term, our vision is that Project SEARCH programs or others like it that really work for young people and for employers are going to be available in many and most of the communities across Canada.

Ingrid Muschta 29:03

I think you know we come to a point where I would like to know if I was a business owner listening to this conversation and thinking this sounds like something I would like to get my business involved. How do I hire graduates and bring Project SEARCH to my community?

Carolyn McDougall 29:20

Yes, excellent question. We love to hear from businesses who want to learn more about Project SEARCH, either to host a training program in their organization, or to learn more about recruiting from the talent pool. So I think the easiest way is to connect with us by visiting the Project SEARCH Canada website, Which is ProjectSearchCanada.ca, and we really start with setting up a meeting to hear about your your organization's needs and priorities, and and see how Project SEARCH could be a part of your workforce strategy.

Dean Askin 29:55

Wow. So many insights about Project SEARCH. Is there anything that we haven't talked about about Project SEARCH that you that that you think is important to mention before we wrap up the conversation? Great insights.

Carolyn McDougall 30:13

Thank you. I know as we think about interviewing, one's always supposed to have a follow up or another question, but I thought this did a good job of bringing to light a lot of the elements that are important for businesses to be thinking about. So I didn't end up with anything else that I really felt had to be shared. Did you have any further questions yourself?

Ingrid Muschta 30:33

So when we were talking, Dean and I were talking, and I was mentioning to Dean that there is a community of practice in in Canada that discusses how to best support not just the program and the students but also the businesses in each community and I'm wondering if that's something you want to touch on.

Carolyn McDougall 30:53

Sure that is a very invigorating aspect of things is that although there might be for example there's also a Project SEARCH in Charlottetown in PEI, and they're doing a great job operating on their own. But also, it's nice to engage with others who are, you know, implementing some of the same methods. So we do sometimes we meet each other a couple times a year for professional development training. We have we host virtual meetings where, for example, the the the people connect as the kind of leads at the different host businesses can get together and discuss exciting initiatives connected to this or questions with others. The educators who are involved also get together. So that is really-it's wonderful to be able to share with other people who who have insights and to be able to tap into a supportive network like that.

Dean Askin 31:49

I think I'm going to have to take a drive over to Charlottetown and talk to the talk to the host business people. It's only an hour and a half. Great great drive on on a summer day.

Carolyn McDougall 32:01

Fantastic! I'm sure they'll welcome you.

Ingrid Muschta 32:05

Well, thank you so much for coming on the show and talking about Project SEARCH Canada. Caroline, it's been a great conversation. I think a bit of a takeaway for me would be that if you're a business owner or an employer in one of the communities that was mentioned before, whether it's Hamilton, London, Sudbury, Halton, Norfolk, just connect with us because there is a talent pool here ready and ready to work and prepare to to take on the roles that businesses need to fill. I think we are going to have a link for Project Search Canada in the show notes, and as I said before, you know, get in touch about being a host, business host, or getting involved in Project SEARCH Canada. Again, Carolyn remind us what is the best way to do that.

Carolyn McDougall 32:56

Yeah, the website is ProjectSearchCanada.ca and info@projectsearch Canada.ca. will reach us.

Dean Askin 33:04

Yes, we will definitely make sure to put that in the show notes as well. Thanks for me as well, Carolyn. You know this is such an important program. I mean, not only because there's a labor shortage, but because young people are the future labor force and the future of the country. You know, I'm thinking Project SEARCH is hammering away at the old catch-22 young people face. I mean, you know, we've all been there. We'd love to hire you, but you don't have any experience. But how do you get experience if nobody will hire you? And youth who have a disability have additional barriers to employment. So I mean, plain and simple, Project SEARCHCanada is playing such an important role for both the host businesses and the students. I mean, it seems like a win-win, right? Students get the experience, training, and support they need to succeed, and businesses are building a talent pipeline they need to succeed. And as you mentioned, you know, Project Search graduates end up getting hired. That's really great to hear when you read about the employment rate gap between youth who have a disability and their peers that don't, I mean, in the U.S. only 31.6% of youth who have a disability are employed, and here in Canada it's 54.4% We've got a long way to go in North America here to catch up to Australia, where 80% of youth who have a disability are employed. That's a 2022 figure from the Federal Australian Institute for Health and Welfare. So hopefully, Project SEARCH Canada can help us catch up to that in the years ahead.

Ingrid Muschta 34:31

Speaking of what's ahead, another episode with a youthful focus about disability is coming in two weeks. Amy Widdows will be back for that episode, a conversation about the importance of stealing disability awareness in childhood. I'm Ingrid Muschta. That's it for me and for this episode of You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D. Dean, it has been fun co-hosting with you.

Dean Askin 34:57

It has been fun. You up for co-hosting? Again in season eight?

Ingrid Muschta 35:01

Bring it on! I've got a great time. I have had a great time, and I'm definitely up for it.

Dean Askin 35:07

Okay, well, co-hosting assignments for season eight coming soon, and yes, so is episode 46 that you mentioned, Ingrid. That conversation about the importance of instilling disability awareness in children when they're early readers is coming Tuesday, August 25. I'm Dean Askin. Thanks again for listening wherever, whenever, and on whatever podcast app you're listening from. Join us each episode as we have insightful conversations like this one about Project SEARCH Canada with Carolyn McDougal, and explore disability inclusion in business and in our communities, from all the angles. You can't spell inclusion without a D is produced in Toronto, Canada, by the Ontario Disability Employment Network. Our podcast production team: executive producer and co-host Amy Widdows. Our producer is Sue Dafoe. Associate producer and co-host Dean Askin. Audio editing and production is by Dean Askin. Our podcast theme is Last Summer by Ixin. If you have feedback or comments about an episode, email us at info@odennetwork.com. That's info at o d e n e t w o r k . c o m . Join us each episode for insights from expert guests as we explore the power of inclusion, the business benefits of inclusive hiring and fostering an inclusive culture, and why disability is an important part of the diversity, equity, inclusion,

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