

Transcript

Episode 49: Making the Journey (Part 2): Matt Rees, ROCKWOOL

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Dean Askin 00:00
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 Widows and Dean Askin. Hello there! Welcome to the show. You're listening to the second last episode of our seventh season. This is episode 49 of You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D. Part Two in our Making the Journey series this season. In case you haven't tuned into this podcast before making the journey as an occasional series of fireside chats with business owners or leaders about the disability inclusive hiring journey in their business and how the experience changed them and the business. Hi there, I'm Dean Askin. In part one of this series, episode 48, guest co-host Liz Goss and I had a conversation with the HR leader of a small catering company, Little Mushroom Catering Company, that's doing big things around disability inclusion in the business community of Cambridge, Ontario, Canada. Be sure to catch that conversation if you haven't yet. In this episode, well, we're going big.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 01:18
We definitely are. Hi, I'm Parnam Paramparnayagam, sitting in for Amy Widows this episode. Great to be here with you at the other mic, Dean.

Dean Askin 01:27
Good to have you back in the other chair for an episode again this season. I mean, as I recall, when you sat in for Amy last season, you said you wanted to do it again, and well, so here we are.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 01:38
Yes, and as you said, we're going big with this making the journey conversation to find out what the disability inclusive hiring journey has been like and how it's still going for the world's largest manufacturer of stone wool insulation. Rockwool started as a family business in 1988 and has been in business for now over 35 years. Its cornerstone first North American production facility was and still is in Milton, Ontario.

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Dean Askin 02:05
Yeah, that's about 40 kilometers west of Toronto, and it's a part of what's called the Greater Toronto Hamilton area. Rockwell's disability inclusive hiring journey started about 10 years ago when the company started expanding globally, and the man who's been overseeing that journey is our guest for this Making the Journey fireside chat. Matthew Reese is Rockwell's Human Resources Director North America. He's also been a member of the Ontario Disability Employment Network's Business Champions League since 2019.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 02:36
He's been a featured speaker on open business panels about the business benefits of disability inclusive hiring, and he's always willing to share his insights with other business leaders when he's called on. Matt, I know you have a busy travel schedule, so thanks so much for making the time to join us here on You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D, and to share your insights about what Rockwell's journey has been like over the last 10 years and where it's going from here. Welcome to the show.

Matt Rees 03:02
Great, thank you, thank you for having me.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 03:04
Well, thank you so much, Matt. And to start things off, how would you describe Rockwell's journey with disability inclusive hiring?

Matt Rees 03:11
So our journey started quite quite a number of years ago, and it was in 2017. So how it actually all started was it was it was a discussion I had with another HR partner in Milton, different company, at a Chamber of Commerce meeting, and what had happened was we would host these roundtable meetings. You'd go to different organizations and talk about challenges, and so one of the things that always would come up is about hiring, just general hiring. You know, scarcity of people to fill any jobs, and this roundtable is largely filled of HR people from manufacturing operations. And so, this individual said at the end of the meeting, if you haven't tried, you should reach out to Odin. And so they gave me a contact. I reached out to Ingrid from Odin, and that's really how the whole journey started. It was strictly, and I've shared this with other businesses. It was there was a strong business need in what we were trying to achieve, and Odin brought a different perspective, a different option that we had not yet ventured, and then that was that was really how it all began. Th

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 04:35
The power of one conversation and how it can lead you down a almost 10 year long journey is incredible, and so what was the first like to reach out to Odin and team up with the Bob Rombal Center to change how you and where you recruited? I know that was a time when Rocco was really growing as a business, and it was, as you mentioned, a very hard time to find the right people.

Matt Rees 05:00
Initially, we had I'd reached out to Ingrid at at Odin, and it was really just to say I got your name. It sounds like you might be able to help us. And what does that look like? And right out of the right out of

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the start, it was focused more of a almost like any other project you run at a company, right? And so we didn't know Bob Rumble existed for many months. So I I met Ingrid and and people at Odin in about October of 2017, and we actually didn't know Bob Rumble existed until March of 2018. So in that six-month window, Igor and I spent a lot of time talking about like what are your goals, how are you trying to achieve it, what business objective are you trying to reach, as there seem to be higher correlation when there's a business objective versus just trying to hit like a diversity or inclusion number, so there was a connection there that we were trying to achieve, and then we basically mapped the whole thing out. So we intentionally knew it was going to take probably about a year and a bit, and obviously the project changed a little bit as time went on. And first, it was just making sure, like, let's start with simple things, factory tours. Let's walk around the facility, do an assessment, because the idea was we didn't know much about hiring people with disabilities, and then what type of disability would best work with our facility, right? So our big thing was we want to make sure that whatever we're putting in place will be effective and also continue. So I mean I'm proud to say some of the original hires are still with us today, almost eight years later, which is which is phenomenal, and we can talk about some of their their journeys that I'm aware of. But it really was just going through a project step. So there was meetings with our factory management team. There was making sure that they understood a lot of the metrics and stuff behind hiring people with disabilities. Of course, as someone that was bringing this to the business, the question that was going through my head was, how is this going to be received? What are the questions we're going to get? And of course, Odin has been through this a couple of times, many times. It sounded like so. They had a deck presented, and they were going through it all, and one of the things that stood out to me really early on in just the project phase was because I guess disabilities aren't talked about as much. But once you start, there is a huge correlation between number of people that actually know somebody that also has a disability, so then quickly, my thoughts or concerns about what what is this going to look like when I break into the company were gone immediately, right? We had a presentation to the senior leadership. They're all like, "Yep, let's move ahead. How can we support? What does this look like?" And then that's when we just started doing a bunch of tours. We have a large facility in our Milton site, so then we were just trying to figure out what what can we do, what kind of accommodations might be needed, and then through that, Odin helped us identify that Bob Rumble was likely going to be the best partnership, and for a number of different reasons. One, it sort of fit within our organization in terms of ability, and they're also very prominently local in Milton, so it sort of made made that connection really good. But on your second question about the hiring, the hiring was interesting because we didn't actually even think about that at the start, right? We want to make sure that first we're doing this intentionally, and then into the hiring, we were extremely lucky to have a job coach that actually worked with Bob Rumble, and so she joined us. She is also deaf, but also an ASL instructor, I believe, from what I recall on that part. And so it was great. So we actually brought her in, showed her the position. She gave us a lot of feedback on how to ensure that the questions were being asked would be understood. Of course, we had interpreters the whole way.

Matt Rees 09:49
She actually learned all the jobs that the people that we were hiring were going to be working in, and then she helped train the people. So this. It seems like a long period of time, maybe to others, between you know, starting this journey in late 2017 and having the first group hired in late 2018. It was

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wonderful, and I think it was because it was so intentional along the way that we knew we were on the right path.

Dean Askin 10:17
It's it's so refreshing to hear you know you talk about the intentionality, and I can hear the I can hear the passion in your voice when you're talking about all this. I mean, looking back, you know, when you had the initial conversations with Ingrid, when you you know when you when when you got the buy-in from you know the the C-suite, what were your initial expectations going to what did you think was going to happen and what did you want to happen?

Matt Rees 10:46
So, what I wanted to happen was to have less comments in our daily meetings about lack of people. Right at the end of the day, as the HR person on site, when you hear, "Oh, we were short people," that's why you know, and they had to juggle people around. That's never a good sign, right? Because you know, the jobs have to get filled to to continue running optimally, right? So once I got the buy-in, I guess even prior to the buy-in, of course, manufacturing safety is always a first concern. What does this look like? How do we make sure that everybody is is safe when they're working for us. But as soon as I got the buy-in from the management team, it was just like a weight was lifted off. Saying, "Okay, that's sort of like any project, right?" As soon as you get the approval to move on and continue on, you're like, "Okay, good. I've got the approval. I've got the support. Let's continue moving on, and then you feel like there's not really going to be anything in your way to stop you from doing it. I think what Odin and I keep saying Ingrid's name. She was a critical part in this whole component. What was excellent was like early on. I guess she also came from an engineering manufacturing background, so we ran it like like a true sort of project. We had potential expected costs that might come up, and it was just nice because it was run in that fashion. Everybody knew about the time that they should get an update, about the time that they should get some sort of feedback on how it's going, and even as we started going down the road of looking at accommodations. One of the things that was really well received, which also changed my perception a bit, was as much as everything was intentional. What comes is a lot of good ideas, and all of those were done with the best intentions. And then quickly it was it was Ingrid again. You're going to hear her name a ton of times, but she's like, "Just hold off. Your intentions are good. You're trying to assume what people will need, and the best thing to do is just ask the person." So early on, once Bob Rumble got involved, we had a deaf person from their group. They weren't an employee with ours with us at the time, so he came through and he was looking around the area and giving us suggestions as well. And I think that also opened up everybody's eyes because what we had assumed would be needed, the person that actually would benefit from those said, "No, don't do that. That's not going to help me at all." And it was very minor things we had to do: changes of mirrors, different things on you know in certain areas of the factory, minor things like training forklift operators to flash lights as they come close to an area. Obviously, the horn is not going to be effective, but lights are good. We changed up some of that, and the best also outcome was you learn that what is good from a safety aspect for one, based on a need, is generally good for everybody. So, you also heard other people going, "Oh, I can't believe they finally put a mirror up in this spot." Like, you know, it was it was just overall very well received. I think the other part that surprised me, and and in a wonderful way, was Bob Rumble had come in to do a presentation. So this is before we had candidates, before we even knew who might be coming to join our team. They came to do a

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presentation to all of our shifts. So we run shift like crew meetings. So there's you know 50 to 75 people in the room at one time, and Bob Rumble came to do a presentation, and we had an interpreter there as someone was speaking that that needed the interpreter, and the best part that came from that because again you're sort of sitting back watching, curious about. The reaction of the whole site would be.

Matt Rees 15:01
The presenter was trying to give some explanation on what it's like to be deaf, and then a couple people in the audience signed back, and were like, "Never once did I think that that was going to happen, but it was so wonderful." And then the only thing that was really interesting was because that was really just saying, okay, this is what it's going to be like. We want to make sure that we're being inclusive and treating everybody as they should be treated, regardless of any type of of disability. And that was in I'm going to say May, early summer of 28, and of course we didn't hire until October, November of 28, and there was quite a bit of months passed between there. So then I would have employees Askin, so what's going on? So I never expected that because we just wanted to basically start the conversations early, basically just get a feedback for any things that we might have to address or figure out how we change our communication style. It went over so well that employees were then following up with me saying, "What's going on? Why aren't why aren't we having more people join us yet?" So so that was interesting. So it was a bunch of sort of nice surprises along the way. That again, I think because I knew I had the support from, again, both Ingrid on like this is going to go well. Also with the management team, you're like, all right, no matter what comes up, you know, we'll we'll get through it.

Dean Askin 16:39
All those things you're kind of stealing the thunder from what I want to ask you next, but it's it's great. I mean, you you were following the guiding principle of of ask the person, and so all of those things you did. How would you say how how's the journey you know changed operations and the culture at Rockwell through all this?

Matt Rees 17:00
So how it changed the culture was it had obviously very positive impact. I mean, if we have employees from our existing employee group following up with us on how this project is going, that's obviously wonderful feedback because sometimes things will be mentioned and and you don't really get any follow up for feedback at all. So right off the the start, we knew it was going to be well received because employees were asking. We intentionally looked at an area of our facility that has closer proximity with other employees. So, because of how large our facility is, there's often employees that will work on their own, not near anybody, and so then, of course, communication becomes a bit more difficult and largely over radios. So then we looked at one area of the facility that has operators just working closer together. So then we intentionally ensured that more than one deaf employee was on a shift together, so that they didn't. Nobody felt left out, and because there was so much involvement, we also had a very active, energetic supervisor that did everything possible at all, like that he could possibly think of to make sure that he did made everybody feel inclusive. So we had done some very brief signs for employees to understand, you know, like something simple. And I realize this is not going to be visual, but like we're like okay, well the simple one would be we have to tell people when they're on break.

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Well, break moving your hands apart from each other in ASL is more that something is broken. Well, that's not the case. It's more that you know you have to go on break. So we did a bunch of intentional trainings with our lead hands, with operators with supervisors in the area. One supervisor went on his own to just look online to do some some individual review to make sure that he could communicate more. So everything was just very very well received. Then we went into COVID, which I hate that I'm still using that term in 2016, that kind of slowed things down a little bit. You know whether it was in our hiring overall, just making sure that we had interpreters when needed for shift meetings and you know performance reviews, any type of communication that was needed with with our employees, so that was a hurdle that we didn't expect. So we we did get through that, and that has been come better now. And now, if we you know jump forward a couple years, the sort of the next challenge, which is which is excellent, my local team is is. Taking it head on, we have employees now with us, potentially almost eight years. It's a unionized shop, so we're also you know job postings come up. You get them based on you know different rules within seniority, and we have a number of our deaf employees that have posted on different rules, so they want to expand out. So my local team is also looking at how do we continue training in different areas of facility. So it's still early when they're not, but yeah. So I'd say it's you know very positive received. It continues to be received. I think you just have to make sure that you always are intentional and thinking about all of your employee groups, so that you're not excluding anybody, you know, even by accident. So,

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 20:50
So and what I love about what you just shared, Matt, in the journey of how the culture and operations have changed, is not just that people received it well. It actually almost feels like people came together. Like they were like, you know what, this is something a new project that they're doing. More people are going to come onto the team, so let's actually all come together and work together to to this common goal. And I think that's a a wonderful benefit that does come uh come about when you start being more intentionally include disability inclusive, right?

Matt Rees 21:23
And it was just to add on that because it was one of the early things as well. Was again, Odin gave a bunch of metrics and numbers about you know how many people are related to or know a friend of that has a disability, and quickly people were like, "I want my family member, I want my friend, I want my neighbor to also have an opportunity to be employed." And so that quickly came through as well to say, like, "I want to be part of a company that gives those opportunities." And so that also made people very happy and and felt good about working for a company that also was willing to go through these steps.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 22:06
Yeah, and and it's so interesting to me because we see the research, right? I read all the stats, and to hear the story from you and it actually happening in in action is great. And I think this kind of leads me to the next question that I had, and you kind of touched upon a little bit, but along this journey, how has your perception of disability and employment or disability awareness changed? And where you first started, and compared to where it is now?

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Matt Rees 22:36
Yeah, I would say prior to this, I didn't have much experience at all, right? And so, you know, sort of the fear of unknown. What does it look like? Is it going to be successful? I think the worst part would be, especially even from an HR person, you don't want to ever set up somebody to fail, right? So, yeah, that was always sort of the worries. Like, what happens if this doesn't work out? You know, not worrying about the the view on myself, but like, you give someone a lot of hope, you give them a job, and then it doesn't work out, and you're like, ah, that's that can be pretty big impact to them, right? So I think now my thought is like, if it is done, and I've used the word a couple times, but if it's done intentionally, and not just to hit a checkbox that we have diversity in our workplace, then it it is successful. I think if you're just chasing a checkbox, unfortunately, you're not putting in the effort to make sure that it will be successful beyond the one person that might be running it, if you do actually run through it, and I said like a project, or you you have a business need for it, and you do all the work to make sure that you know whatever groups of people you're hiring from anywhere in the community will be successful, as long as you're putting in that effort to make sure, then then it will run just well. And I know, like right now, as I said, we've got employees that are looking to change positions, and it wasn't like okay, you know, just make it happen tomorrow. It's like no, it's the same idea. Let's go back. I know they've connected with Odin, my team to say okay, like how do we get this training? What does it look like? How can we again make sure that is intentional so that when the person does move into that role, if they do, that they will be successful, right? So I think that's the big part. Is like you can't rush it, and it can't be just to hit a checkbox to say that you're an inclusive employer. You have to truly want to just take the time to do it properly.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 24:49
For sure, and I think what I want to what I wonder is, despite being very intentional and taking your time with your journey, I'm sure there may. Have been some challenges or bumps along along the way. So, would you be able to share some of those challenges that have come up over the last nine years?

Matt Rees 25:09
Yeah, absolutely. I think one of the big challenges was we hired initially like a group. So there's six people that started off at with us at the start, and some worked out and some didn't, and and that was also probably a challenge on the operational side. Was we're bringing somebody in, we've done the accommodations. Let's make sure though that we're still holding them accountable for what they're getting paid for. So early on, there was a lot of discussions also with our operational side to say, if someone needs to have coaching or discipline, then do that. That's okay. You have to, you know, treat everybody equally, and make sure that the the accountability and the standard is the same. We're going to put in things in place to make sure that they can achieve that, but you still have to hold them to the same standard as others. Because then, the worry would be if you don't, then others will wonder like, well, someone's getting easier, you know, you know, easier opportunity than somebody else. So, so I'd say that was one hurdle at the start to make sure that you know everybody understood. As long as we're putting in and you know doing everything that we can do to make sure somebody is successful, then you have to hold them accountable to that. So I think that was one. Early on, we did have one individual that was not paired with somebody else on shift, and so again, we just wanted to make sure that you know we didn't want to have anybody left on their own. I think to have the entire site of our all of our employee group being able to learn sign language is not an expectation we ever had.

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So we want to make sure that there was enough people on every shift to continue conversations and do that. So there was a bit of a challenge there at one point in time, and then honestly, through through through COVID was very challenging. There was many times when we couldn't get an interpreter, and that was horrible. I mean, we we would have shift meetings, and nobody was there. We would follow up later and and apologize when you know either interpreter wasn't available or didn't show or whatever it might have been, and that that was tough. That was tough because you know that that person probably feels completely left out. So we would, you know, ensure we did the catch up with with the individuals that were missed, and then I'd say once once sort of COVID passed, you saw a couple of other nice things where, and this was wonderful. We had we had a candidate also from the deaf community had been referred to by one of our employees, replied to an online post, but didn't indicate that they needed any accommodation for the interview, and that was a change that we did. You know, making sure that it was in our posting so that people can reach out ahead of time. And we went through the interview. We got somebody on the phone and managed through. So I think, as much as there were some challenges on the onset, you sort of have to adapt as well. So I'd say, yeah, those were probably the main challenges that really didn't make you feel good because you're like, we set up all these things, and some of the changes, some of the negative parts that happened were on us, right? So we'd have a last-minute shift meeting change. Well, that's not always on the interpreter. We just couldn't find one in that short time, right? And so there's a bunch of learning in that to make sure that you know going forward, if we set a day, that's the day because you know some of it is on us to make sure that we're also ensuring that the all the different tools are set up to make sure everybody understands what's going on. So, but I'd say that was one of the big hurdles for sure.

Dean Askin 29:04
You've been talking about you know the the balancing act between providing equitable opportunity but equal accountability, and sometimes people don't necessarily understand the difference between equity and equal. That equal is applying the same thing to everybody, and equitable is making sure everybody has exactly what they need to succeed. And COVID, I mean, a lot of things are more beyond you know beyond your control. And it's you've done so much right. I mean, so and you kind of touched on it, but what do you think Rockwall has done right in all of that, and where do you see room still to make improvements along the way?

Matt Rees 29:45
So I think where we did right was, as I said, we were not chasing a diversity metric. That was never the intention because it was tied to. Business school, and we had very quickly early on approval, if you will. It's not the right word. It was more just endorsement to continue on. That that sort of sparked the whole thing. I think what I also learned through this was you can't do it on your own. There's no way That myself on my own could continue doing this and still have it running well today. So I think that was a big part: is just making sure that you're always looking at how do we do this, what business objective is it tied to, and that we're not chasing, you know, as I said, a checkbox for inclusion. That that is not. I don't think that's the way to win, in my book. What we can continue doing better is, when we should continue to have our existing employee group that is part of this, you know, the deaf community. We should continue finding out feedback from them. I know early on it was almost weekly. At the end of the shifts, we would chat, find out how it went, what's different, what do you need to do now. That obviously should probably restart. And I think the other part is we really have to look at future opportunities within

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the business, so the fact that we now have employees that, based on seniority and all that stuff, are eligible to move on to other positions, we have to look at what they look like and and what those rules become, how we do the training. So I am talking with my local team as well, but I think the biggest part is again, don't rush it. Be open about communicating how it's going to work, and making sure that we're driving it forward. I think the other part that we can continue to do is how do we ensure that we're still advertising that we are and do hire, especially people that are are deaf, so that they know there is an opportunity. Early, early on, and again before COVID, there's so much stuff that went wrong during that period of time. But you know, we did presentations at the local school of the deaf in Milton to advertise what's going on, we brought one of the employees, our employees, there with us to also share his experience, and so I think there's more reaching out that our site can do to ensure that people in the community know their opportunities.

Dean Askin 32:35
What would you say some of the key lessons are that you've learned along the way, or that you're still learning every day through all of this.

Matt Rees 32:43
Yeah, I would say key lessons would be really, really around making sure that it is visible and talked about often, just to make sure that it's on top of mind, right? I think most manufacturing just runs. It just keeps going and keeps moving. And and the whole intention is we're making product, and we want to make sure that we're also keeping on mind all of the good things that we do for engagement and for employees. And every time that comes up, making sure that all of our employees are covered, regardless of disabilities, not disabilities, different ones, and even ones that we're not aware of, just to make sure that we're doing what we can. So I think that would be one thing that that we again need to continue working on and continue doing.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 33:39
That's very interesting, and you mentioned about talking and keeping it top of mind. So you are an ODEN business champion, and I'm sure you're having a lot of conversations with other HR leaders. So what are you still finding that are still misconceptions about workplace disability inclusion, or that hesitancy to make the shift and be intentional about disability inclusive hiring in your experience.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 34:04
Yeah, so when I do bring it up and we talk about an opportunity, and I've shared my sort of journey and the project that Ingrid and I ran with with quite a number of different HR leaders. There's usually sometimes there's a hesitation to bring it to their management team, and I think that hesitation is really just on the acceptance. What will the the thoughts be? And usually, I share the exact same as I have here, which is there's a strong, like a high percentage of people that know somebody that has a disability, and really the message isn't we should hire people with disabilities. It's like, don't you want to work for a company where you know there are opportunities provided that others don't get, right? And so it's it's trying to change that a little bit instead of. Just as I said, this this checks box in terms of a metric, and I think the other part is usually when I've heard it as like a resistance or or sort of question is really around. It started as a DEI need, and I keep sharing that. Don't do it that way. In my perspective, this is not a Rockwell perspective. This is my personal perspective. Is again, if you tie it to

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a metric, if one day that metric isn't important anymore, or isn't measured, you know, then it has a greater chance of not succeeding. So find the business need of where you're trying to get, and then how does this become a potential solution? So again, for me at the time, and I still remember back in 2017, it was horrible trying to find people. I don't know what happened, but it was horrible. It was it was worse than COVID. But in 2017, it was all that was talked about. And partly, you know, Milton is known as a bit more of a bedroom community. You got go right into Toronto, all that sort of stuff. So I was trying to find out different people to reach out from from a label perspective, so from my perspective, from the operation perspective, it's like just find people. Okay, done. So I really think that is that is also the the challenges. You know, if it's if it is more related to a DEI metric, then there probably isn't as much thought and intention put in, or willing to be put into, you know, make it sustainable.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 36:48
Yeah, and as you're sharing this perspective, or you're having these conversations, and you're highlighting that it can't be just a metric you're working towards, and I'm sure you'll follow up that with Rockwell's story of how you were intentional about what the business objective. What is usually the peer's reaction to that story? It's like when you're like, "Hey, don't do like this. This is what we did." How how do they respond?

Matt Rees 37:11
Positively, like they're like, "Okay, that makes sense." Because, I mean, I think I speak logically, and it you know sort of as I'm talking, it sounds good, and truthfully, sometimes there are people in passing at you know conferences or different items. So I don't really get a chance to follow up to see what happened. So whether they take it on and are successful or they take it on and it isn't, I don't really know.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 37:40
Wow, I'm wondering, you know, based on you know on what you said about what your peers say and Rockwell's experience on this ongoing journey, what do you think other business leaders and their companies are are missing out on? You know, if they don't start practicing, you know, intentionally and don't tap into the disability town pool.

Matt Rees 38:04
What they're missing out on is so one. It has a massive positive, you know, impact on not only your culture engagement. Obviously, in our case, there's a productivity because we needed people to continue running as as well as we can, so they're missing out on on creating a workplace that their own employees, existing employees, will feel better about working there. And so, in my mind, if you have engaged employees that enjoy the company, the values they represent, and they see the actions of the company that they want to be a part of. Your existing employee group will also become more engaged, more loyal, stay longer. So I think what they're missing out on is not only are you going to bring in valuable, productive employees to work for your team, you're also going to increase the engagement and the loyalty of your current existing group. So I think you're you're missing out on an opportunity.

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 39:19

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And and to add to that is that there's probably a lot of HR business leaders listening to this episode right now. So, what is one thing that you would want to share with them, like a main message that you feel would be something they need to hear right now and take away from this conversation?

Matt Rees 39:39
If I had to wrap it all up into one sort of frame would be that it's hard to imagine how much of a positive impact it will have on your your company, your culture, your organization, and there is effort to put into it, and it pays back in spades. The the end result when doing it well, you will be so happy that you've done it, and you will see, as I said, positive changes within your current workforce. You will feel even yourself more proud of the company that you work for, and overall, it is it is wonderful to know that you belong to a company that is willing to go through this journey. So it's it's just overall a very positive personal feeling, but you know that that feeling then is shared by the rest of your employees. So it's it's it is the right thing to do. So you need to just take the first step, start the process, reach out to Ingrid at Odin. Yeah, and as I said, you know she'll go on the right path. You'll you'll be on the right path.

Dean Askin 40:56
Yeah, Ingrid is. I guess that throws it back to me to to ask the last question because I always get to ask ask the last question on this podcast, but I I just got to say you know Ingrid is a master of you know probing for details and finding out what you really and what you you know what you you know what you want to accomplish and I mean I think that probably all goes back to the fact that she's an engineer and and by trade when I was in journalism school we used to make fun of the engineers walking walking down the hall, but yeah, I guess you know you've been great, Matt, and we've talked about thank you so much and and so many great insights. I mean, is there anything we haven't talked about that you think is important to mention just before we wrap it all up? This is where we get to find out if we've done our job as as interviewers.

Matt Rees 41:44
Yeah, no, I I think you did a great job. I I would say yeah. Again, thank you so much. I've I've enjoyed the conversation and I've been open and have shared my story with other businesses and and will continue when when asked to to speak up, so yeah, thank you for the opportunity,

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 42:04
Matt. Thank you so much for coming onto the show and for being a part of this episode of Making the Journey Fireside Chat and sharing all the insights about Rockwell's continuing disability inclusion journey. It's been a really great conversation, and for me personally, the intentionality behind your journey and how you took your time, and for me, what I really appreciate is that it wasn't just another DEI project or DEI metric that you guys tried to meet. You literally had, you really had a business need, and you figured out how can we be inclusive and meet our business objective at the same time, and I think that more and more companies need to hear this message and hear your story, because when we look at the research, there's a study by Deloitte in 2018, for example, that says inclusive companies are three times more likely to be high performing businesses, and Accenture also has done a lot of research that shows how much more profitable and productive companies can be by being intentional about disability inclusion. And Rockwell is a great example of that, right? And on the other side, we see from Return on Disability Group, who did a quarterly survey in 2024 that found that 60% of manager

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surveys survey didn't even think they have any employees who have a disability, and I think that was a case in point with you. And after that meeting, you had a few people sign back. So there's still so much research out there that is sharing that most employees and even executives may have a disability or maybe related to someone who has a disability, but they don't disclose because they don't necessarily feel safe doing so, and research shows that too. And what I really love about Rockwell is that it was all about building an inclusive culture. And when it's done right, even with all the bumps along the way, it can it can really make a difference.

Dean Askin 43:58
Yeah, and I, you know, I gotta say thanks for me as well, Matt. You know, and I'm so glad that you and I were finally able to connect, so we could have this conversation. Because I mean, I think, geez, you know, I mean, I started in the summer of 2019 in Odin, and I think it was way back in 2020 or 2021 when I first reached out to you with the idea about doing a business champion profile and and having a conversation about you and all this and well you got busy and I got busy and five years later here we are I mean we finally had that conversation and it really has been a great one I mean better five years later than never right so thanks again for coming on the show you know you talked about how Rockwell intentionally changed its recruiting strategy when you were having trouble finding people to work at the flagship production and facility in Milton, and that intentional is just so refreshing and important, especially you know when you know with geopolitical things that are going on and the state of DEI these days. I mean. Intentionally to learn more about people with a disability, you know, who are looking for work and and tapping into a skilled and dedicated labor force. I mean, yeah, it's the right thing to do because it's a human rights thing. I mean, you know, everyone's entitled to an equitable opportunity under the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. But there's that practical side of it all that there's a labor shortage in Canada, as Rockwell experienced, and that shortage is going to last. They're saying until 2030 or longer. And I remember reading a 2023 report by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business that found businesses across all sectors in this country lost over 38 billion dollars in revenue because of labor shortages. I mean, so plain and simple, practicing intentional disability inclusion is just good business sense. Now, Parna mentioned some of the research that's been done. We'll have links to some of that research in the show notes for this episode, and lots of those research reports are housed on Odin's website, you can go to OdinNetwork.com/businesses/business-resources and choose the Research and Reports Accordion. And I know there's also a case study about Rockwell in the case studies accordion there. And of course, we'll have a link to the Rockwell website on on the show notes for this episode,

Pawrnaa Perinpanayagam 46:22
and that's it for this episode of You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a D. Amy Widdows will be back in the co-host chair for the last episode of the season. Episode 50 is coming in two weeks. Amy and Dean will be looking at the state of disability inclusion in business in Canada and in 2026. I'm Parna Krimpanagam and Dean. This has been a lot of fun.

Dean Askin 46:45
Yeah, you're right. I mean, it has been good coasting with you at the other mic again. You know, one more episode to go this season, and then we'll be into planning the 2027 show lineup for season eight of You Can't Spell Inclusion Without He. And yes, you mentioned episode 50, I'm looking forward to

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that conversation with our three guests because the first time we looked at the state of disability inclusion in business in Canada was way back in episode 14 in 2023. It's been three years, so we figured it's time to check in on the state of things as 2026 winds down. That's coming Tuesday, november 24. 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 really, really great one about Rockwell's disability inclusion journey with Matt Reese, 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 Widows. Our producer is Sue Defoe. Associate producer and co-host Dean Askin. Audio editing and production is by Dean Askin. Our podcast theme is "Last Summer" by Ikson. If you have feedback or comments about an episode, email us at info@odenetwork.com. That's info at o d e n e t w o r k.com. 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, and accessibility conversation. Tune into You Can't Spell Inclusion Without a Dean Podbean, or wherever you find your favorite podcasts.

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