

Co-op Program Leads to Full-Time Employment



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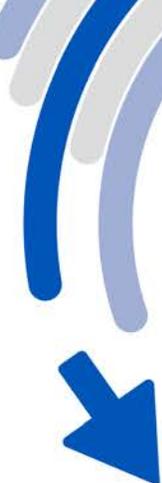
Photo: Steven Woo walking with friends and his assistance dog, Horatio

When Craig Richmond, president and CEO of Vancouver Airport Authority (YVR), approached his Human Resources team about increasing diversity in YVR’s workforce, they were immediately onboard. The only problem was finding vacancies in an organization with such low employee turnover. The solution was YVR’s co-operative education program.

Working with the Disability Resource Centres at various post-secondary partner institutions, YVR started a pilot pathfinding project that explicitly encouraged co-op applicants with disabilities to apply and voluntarily self-declare in their cover letters.

Steven Woo, an individual living with a visual impairment, was one of the successful applicants for a co-op opportunity with the Airport Authority’s Communications Department. Along with his assistance dog, Horatio, Steven spent four summer months as a community ambassador on the YVR Flight Crew, attending 47 summer festival days between the beginning of May and the end of August and promoting YVR through its “Get Packing” contest.

To ensure Steven was well-supported, YVR connected him with the Neil Squire Society. Among many services, they deliver Technology@Work, a government-funded program that provides assistive technology to British Columbians for employment or volunteer activities.



After assessing Steven's work environment, the Neil Squire Society provided him with a 34-inch monitor, a video magnifier and several other innovative solutions.

Upon graduation from Langara College, Steven joined the Airport Authority as a permanent, full-time Communications Assistant. He now leads YVR's Explorer Tour program in addition to being involved in a number of research projects.

Describing how hiring Steven has enhanced her team and brought value to the organization, his manager, Jenny Duncan, said, "Steven is a key member of our Community Relations team and brings his own experience and insight that helps us to grow our programs to ensure we meet the needs of our broader community. He has helped us evaluate our own internal systems and processes which help our organization grow its mandate to be accessible—we are all learning together."

Steven returned the praise: "The organization is very open to creating a diverse and inclusive workplace. It has made me feel comfortable being here and speaking openly about the accommodations I need to do my job." Steven pointed out that other employers may be inclined to hire people with disabilities, but are intimidated by the accommodation process: "I recognize that I am very fortunate to be in this environment. Vancouver Airport Authority has done an excellent job."

YVR's advice to other employers looking to expand their inclusive hiring practices is to seek counsel from employers who have gone through those processes and outreach groups supporting persons with disabilities, such as the Technology@Work program through the Neil Squire Society, WorkBC Employment Services Centre and Open Door Group.