Contracting Neuro-Diverse IT Professionals for System Conversion

Vancity **Focus** Professional Services Inc.

vancity.com   **focusps.ca**

OVERVIEW

Vancity was undertaking a large scale system conversion that required significant resources across the organization, and additional IT resources. They were looking for skilled testers who could quickly learn a highly complex system, apply that knowledge in new functional areas, and go through testing. Not having the sufficient resources in-house, Vancity worked with Focus Professional Services to contract individuals to complete this work.

OBJECTIVES

Vancity wanted to increase their software testing capacity during a mission-critical IT project. They needed to contract skilled IT professionals to complement their existing internal resources. Given the timelines of the project, they needed individuals who were trained in IT areas including: software testing, learning a new complex system, etc. Vancity also knew that this need was temporary (a year to start), and therefore were looking for contractors to complete this work.

APPROACH

Vancity partnered with Focus Professional Services (Focus). Focus' mandate is to provide IT services, contracting out staff that are trained through their program. Most of the employees at Focus are on the autism spectrum. The process they went through together is detailed below:

- Focus was contracted to provide a team of software testers and a team lead.
- Vancity trained the contractors on their new IT system, and they went through an orientation session designed specifically for this cohort.
- Vancity held an Autism in the Workplace session for the employees in IT.
- Focus worked with them to execute functional test cases.
- The team of software testers began to work on system testing.

Focus Was Contracted to Provide a Team

In November 2014, Focus had just completed its first onboarding of new employees when Vancity requested their services to supplement their software testing and data quality teams in their system conversion project. The contract began December 1, 2014 and involved Focus supplying a team lead, 6 software testers on the autism spectrum, and 2 data quality technicians also on the spectrum. Focus' employees had been through their Workplace Skills training as well as Software Testing training and were keen and excited to start their first work assignment.

In preparation, to introduce autism in the workplace to Vancity, Focus presented their *Autism in the Workplace* training to approximately 200 Vancity employees. Through the duration of the contract, Focus also provided ongoing autism-related support to Vancity's managers and team members working with their employees. Focus' intent, over time, is to transfer their autism knowledge to their clients, normalizing neurodiversity in the workplace.

Vancity Offered Training

Vancity ensured that two types of training was provided to the new team members. The first type of training was technical, and about the new IT system that Vancity was moving to. This was the system that the contractors would be working with. The second training was an introduction to the organization. This included a visit from the CEO, where new team members were able to ask the CEO questions directly. Both trainings contributed to the new team members integrating into the organization successfully.

Autism in the Workplace Session

Vancity was aware that some of their staff had never worked with someone with autism before. In order to ensure that the integration of the Focus team was successful, they held a session to help employees understand what autism is, and what it isn't. The session also provided employees the opportunity to ask questions in a safe space, so that any misconceptions or myths could be openly discussed. This session led to a better understanding by all employees involved.

OUTCOMES

Over the one year contract, the Focus team became knowledgeable in 15+ functional areas through functional testing processes and system testing. During this time, the Vancity Team Lead remarked on the team's impressive knowledge of the system. Focus was able to keep pace with the Vancity software testers and, in addition, created test data as needed by the project. Because of the effectiveness and efficiency of the Focus software testing team, Vancity was able to re-deploy two existing employees to other areas of the IT project.

LESSONS LEARNED

Vancity and Focus both learned a great deal during this process. Their learnings are detailed below.

Maintaining Collaboration

A successful business relationship between Focus and Vancity required regular collaboration and communication. An open relationship allowed Vancity and Focus to work through any potential challenges, and seize opportunities for further collaboration.

Neuro-diverse Individuals are as Diverse as Neuro-typical Individuals

Individuals on the autism spectrum are as diverse as individuals not on the spectrum. They are diverse in their capabilities and talents, and should not be grouped together simply because they have autism. There are a lot of myths about people with autism doing well in repetitive, technical jobs. While that might be true for some individuals, that is not necessarily true for all. In addition, individuals with autism can also excel in jobs that require critical thinking, research and analysis.

People Need a Space to Ask Questions

Having a session for employees on understanding autism in the workplace was helpful for the team as it provided employees a chance to ask questions in a safe, open environment. This led to a better understanding and allowed the new employees to integrate more successfully into the Vancity environment.

NEXT STEPS

The contract with Focus was renewed for an additional year, and the team is integrating into other projects and learning an additional 30 functional areas.