

Accessibility Internship Program Changes Perceptions of Ability While Meeting Business Needs



OVERVIEW

The Vancouver Fraser Port Authority sees employee diversity as a firmly held value within their organization at all levels and it is understood that a diverse culture leads to better collaboration, problem solving, and innovation. As part of that commitment to diversity, the port authority hosts an Accessibility Internship Program every year.

The program offers one individual with disabilities an opportunity to develop work skills and experience while meeting a pertinent business need. The program is focused on securing the right candidate, assessing their skills and abilities, and then matching them to a short-term business need. This allows the port authority to address emerging, varying business needs and also shift internal perceptions on ability as this intern immerses themselves into the business.

OBJECTIVES

The Accessibility Internship Program was designed to:

- Provide an opportunity for individuals with disabilities to gain meaningful work experience which, in turn, may assist them in obtaining permanent employment.
- Change internal perceptions and assumptions of ability.
- Demonstrate internally and externally the port authority's commitment to being a diverse, inclusive employer.
- Meeting pertinent business needs by matching the skill sets of interns to relevant projects.

APPROACH

The port authority takes a thorough approach to this project to ensure its success and sustainability.

As outlined below:

- Working with internal partners.
- Working with external partners.
- Selecting a role.
- Interview and onboarding.
- Transition at end of term.

Working with Internal Partners

Once a proposal for the program was developed, it was taken to both the executive team and then to the union for endorsement because commitment from both was vital to the success of the program. Both were fully on board and continue to be strong partners in the program.

Working with External Partners

After internal approvals, the next step for the program was to find disability service organizations that met the port authority's needs. These partnerships supports finding the right candidates for the Internship. The disability service organization is asked to provide a preferred candidate, or two, for consideration. Having candidates pre-selected by the disability service organization, which knows both the port authority and the candidates well, is helpful to the port authority.

Selecting a Role

Once a preferred candidate is selected, the port authority reviews the candidate's key skillsets and interests, looking to match these skills with a current business need. The proposed candidate is then reviewed by the specific department responsible for meeting that business need, and an internship role is identified.

Interviewing and Onboarding

As with all interviews at the port authority, the questions and interview design are customized to the specific role. Human resources and the department manager interview the preferred candidate and identify if the candidate has any specific needs to be addressed. Once the Internship begins, the candidate goes through same onboarding process as other employees, being mindful of any specific needs or accommodations required by the candidate. Education and training is also available for the team members and those involved in the hiring and onboarding process on either general disability awareness, or more specifically, the disability the candidate may have if they are comfortable sharing this information.

Transition at End of Term

Once the term is complete, the candidate is welcome to apply for any job postings at the port authority. If there isn't a suitable, available position, the port authority works to ensure the candidate has a reference, and provides support needed to secure future employment.

OUTCOMES

This program has been very successful, and the port authority continues to offer this Internship on an annual basis. One outcome is increased employee awareness of the importance of inclusiveness. Awareness of the program continues to spread within the organization, and the union and the port are currently working on a side letter to increase awareness of the program. The Internship has also increased management's awareness of accommodation and the ability of diverse candidates.

Lastly, because this is a program in which both management and the union are equally involved, it has resulted in a stronger labour relationship and a program of which both parties are proud.

LESSONS LEARNED

The Vancouver Fraser Port Authority continues to learn from this program as it evolves and has captured some of the key learnings below.

Transition at End of Term

Once the term is complete, there isn't always a suitable position available to the candidate. It is important to prepare the candidate for this at the beginning of the Internship by linking the candidate to other services available to help with next steps.

Employee Perceptions of Accommodation

General employee awareness and education, while respecting the privacy of the individual, is ongoing to ensure there aren't misconceptions of why or how some employees are being accommodated, as well as to emphasize the goals of the program in creating opportunities for people with disabilities who have been traditionally disadvantaged.

Continue Being Proactive

As an organization hires more people with disabilities, knowledge on how to make the workplace more accessible can increase. The port authority aims to be proactive in increasing workplace accessibility.

NEXT STEPS

The port authority is continuing with the Accessibility Internship Program, and making the workplace more diverse, inclusive, and accessible.