

ONxpress Podcast v.1 - Final Cut

[Upbeat music plays briefly. Then Abilities at Work podcast interviewer Glen Walsh begins speaking. He introduces ONxpress Senior Employee engagement and change management specialist Kristen Light]

Hello, and welcome to Abilities at Work, a podcast hosted by the Canadian Association for Supported Employment. Coming up now, we're going to hear from Kristen Light from ONxpress.

So could you introduce yourself, including your name, your position, and your organization?

[Kristen elaborates]

Sure, I'm Kristen Light. I'm a senior employee engagement and change management specialist for ONxpress' Civil Construction Group.

So ONxpress civils for the construction segment of a larger transit project in southern Ontario. So our main client is Metrolinx, if you're familiar with them. And we are doing work on the GoTrain system, typically electrifying the Lakeshore East and West line, which is one of the most populous lines that exists down here.

So we're a consortium of two different companies, Acon and FCC. FCC is out of Spain. On the project there's also Deutsche Bahn out of Germany and Alstom out of France. And we are working on the construction side of things. So we're in the development phase right now, but just doing some of the pre work, soil testing, planning, designing of bridges, things like that.

And we'll be into construction heavily in the next few months.

[Glen asks Kristen another question]

Can you provide an overview of ONxpress and why have you – having a diverse workforce and inclusive workforce is important to ONxpress?

[Kristen responds]

Yeah. So I started here about a year and a half ago and my experience outside of here is particularly around mental health, consulting with companies, et cetera, mental health programs, as well as neuro inclusion, neurodiversity trainings, things like that.

And when I came to ONxpress, I'd never worked in a construction environment before I worked around engineering, but construction – that side of it was new to me and I learned some information early on that knocked the breath out of me, which doesn't happen very often. I'll be honest.

Working in supported employment, you're exposed to harsh statistics on the regular, but this one really flattened me. And it is that in construction, both in Canada and the U S at least, construction workers have the highest rate of suicide of any industry. And despite all the focus on physical safety, all the safety regulations, safety, training, safety equipment, P P E, you're still 5 times more likely to die by suicide as a construction worker than you are by all other construction related fatalities combined. 5 times more.

That knocked me on my feet when I heard that. And it got me thinking, okay why? So we've got all these construction companies out here trying to do mental health programs. And that's awesome. Great. Do it.

And so where we – I am co-chair, I helped found the mental health committee here as well, but I wanted to back it up and start looking at the why. And that's what brought us to two things. It brought us to neuro inclusion. There's a huge overlap between increase of suicidal ideations and being neurodivergent.

Really huge statistics around autism and ADHD and dyslexia in particular. So I wanted to look at that aspect of it, but on the other hand, this industry is also facing huge labor shortage. It is really difficult to find enough people and fill enough roles.

And yet when you walk the hallways, you look around this place, it's like somebody just hit copy, paste, copy, paste, copy, paste on every single person that you pass, you get racial diversity, you're starting to get women, not a lot, but you're starting to get women in this industry, but the disability community, the neurodivergent, were not represented at all.

And it got me thinking why? And it comes down, I think, to the classic – it's just always been that way. It just never occurred to anybody. And yet the majority of jobs, the majority of

jobs on a project like this are not the ones out in the field holding big, heavy equipment. Not to say that folks with disabilities can't do that.

Many can, absolutely. Ability comes in all sizes and shapes and kinds, but the majority of the jobs – you're sitting at a laptop all day long, or standing at a laptop. What the hell? All kinds of folks could have jobs, could have careers, really lucrative careers in this industry, but we have to take a look at where the barriers are happening? Where the barriers are in place?

Again, they've always been that way. And so taking on a project like what we're doing here with the CASE Innovation Lab, we called ours the On Board Construction Inclusion Project, obvious train pun there. The business case behind it was obviously to solve the labor shortage, open up the pool of candidates for all types of roles.

But secondly, improve the day to day experience for those that are already here. Because as we know, a lot of disabilities, a lot of challenges are non-apparent, they're hidden, they're invisible. So I knew, I do employee engagement, I've done surveys here, I know we have a lot of us here, myself included, that are neurodivergent.

I'm autistic, ADHD, depression, OCD, I could go on forever on that list myself. And as I started coming forward with that, more and more people, of course, came out of the woodwork. So we already have people here, but they feel forced to hide all those aspects of themselves in order to survive in this career.

And in 2024, there's just no need for that.

[Glen agrees and then proceeds to ask Kristen another question]

Yeah, no, you're right. And so, you mentioned Innovation Lab initiatives. Can you go into that and tell me your experience around that and how CASE and the Innovation Lab supported your initiative?

[Kristen answers]

We were so excited to get this grant. I can't even put it into words and it wasn't just the funds.

It was the support. It was the vote of confidence. It just, it put legs behind an initiative that had been sitting on a shelf. The team at CASE has been incredible. From the moment we applied, I was able to talk back and forth with various people at CASE, and they were so helpful. Even just writing the grant was an incredible experience, and we made the decision to go forward with as much as we could, regardless of whether we got the funding or not.

But getting the funding just opened so many doors. If you've ever tried to go through the procurement process to get an expense approved in a large corporate environment. Oh my word, you got to jump through hoops you didn't even know existed. And having this funding just gave us an opportunity to plow ahead with initiatives, with development, with hiring consultants that we knew were important, but that would have taken 6 months, 8 months to get approval on otherwise.

It just opened up the possibilities and the response has been wild, absolutely wild, I'm going to be honest. Before we'd even done anything, we were getting calls from other construction companies, from other rail companies, from other larger corporations that just wanted to know what we were up to over here.

Folks in manufacturing and infrastructure, all of these areas that hadn't dipped toes into supported employment as much as, say, retail hospitality, some of these other industries are light years ahead of where engineering and construction are, but folks are excited. I think there's a general understanding that this is needed, but nobody realized it until they hear it.

And then this light bulb goes off. It's really cool to watch this, "Oh, of course, that makes absolute sense. Of course, get this industry open", so it's been pretty wild like that. Getting to go a couple weeks ago to the CASE conference, the Supported Employment Conference and get to meet all the other people, the other projects that were going on, I had a long conversation with somebody that had spent 20 years in construction and left it because of the lack of accessibility and moved into supported employment.

And we sat down and just had the longest, most incredible conversation. And it was so validating. I think in this work, you can end up in a silo really easily, especially doing a project like ours, which is we're trying to do systemic change. It's not as easy as we worked with 10 people and all 10 people have full time work. Success.

Trying to make systemic change is a little harder to measure. So getting to balance ideas off of people and get the confirmation, the validation that we're on the right track. If I'm going to keep throwing in rail puns here, it was absolutely invaluable. It was amazing.

[*Glen replies*]

So do you think in the constructive industry as a whole, I think there's a view in terms of round accommodation and helping people with disability that it would be taxing on doing that.

I think they have a vision of what a disability is and in terms of accommodation would be too difficult or they don't necessarily believe that somebody with a disability could do a job like construction.

[*Kristen agrees and elaborates*]

You hit the nail on the head right there. Absolutely. I'm going to be honest. We've been working in this project now for about nine months.

And the biggest hurdle, biggest accomplishment, is that invisible brick wall. It's fear. It's fear based. Even when I first started, talking to some of the key personnel here and pitching the idea, and I would be met with these looks of concern of, "Oh, but we can't hire those people here. They won't, they can't do that. Those people can't do this". And I finally had to stare them down and say, I am those people. I have many disabilities myself that I deal with every day. Lots of the employees here have non-apparent disabilities. It doesn't affect your intelligence. Doesn't affect your ability to design a building, for example.

It just may do it differently. The A to B of the task may look different, but the end result, the deliverable is still there. Maybe better than you thought it could have been in the first place, because now you've got employees that are considering more angles, more service options, more people.

And at the end of the day, we're doing this project for people and all of these accessibility initiatives are being put in place at the transit level, at the user level, to make sure that it's open and accessible for as many users as humanly possible. Why are we not doing that for our own staff? Why are we segregating our own staff?

How are we supposed to serve a population that our staff doesn't even represent? It's fascinating to watch the wheels slowly turn in someone's brain to think. Especially when I tell them that only 4 percent of people with disabilities use mobility aids or anything visible. They're like, what? Only 4? Yeah, there's 96 percent more people. And sitting down in a wheelchair does not affect your ability to design a bridge and we have all these desks in our offices with adjustable height anyway.

So we're fine. Let's do this. Let's hire some people.

[*Glen agrees and then asks two more questions*]

Yeah, exactly. And like you say, it's just something that they're necessarily thinking, but it isn't really reality when it all comes boils down to it. In terms of ONxpress' future goals and plans, how are you going to enhance or maybe do some initiatives around hiring people experiencing disabilities? Any more initiatives in the future?

[*Kristen answers*]

Oh yeah. A lot. I'll be honest. One year was just a drop in the bucket of the amount of change and development that needs to happen, but at least it started. A good chunk of our experience with CASE Innovation Lab was around breaking down enough of the stigma that we can have the conversations. That we can get the data, that we can do the focus groups, that we can meet with the consultants.

We couldn't start with recruitment. We couldn't start with trying to hire people. It would have been a bait and switch. There was so much that had to be adjusted and prepared with mindsets, with systems, with expectations. All of that had to be done first. And it's only recently, it's only now that we're really overhauling the recruitment process and starting to get into that world a little bit more.

And so these initiatives, these things that we've started, the ball's rolling now. It's rolling down a hill. We're just going to keep it going. I don't think there's an end. I'm going to be honest. I don't think there's an end to this. I think it's one of those initiatives that now that we're starting, now that minds are being opened to the possibility, now there can be a hiring blitz.

Because now we've got some systems in place to support all kinds of people. Our teams feel a little more prepared to welcome more people. Our software suite is a little more robust and ready for whoever.

[*Glen comments and then asks a final question*]

It's great to see ONxpress.

I think you've come such a long ways, you're expressing it here about what initiative ONxpress has been taking in terms of hiring people with experiencing disabilities. So what advice would you offer other companies considering developing practices on hiring people who experience disabilities?

[*Kristen responds*]

Biggest piece of advice. I love this question. What I've learned in the last year, tackle stigma first, hire second. Don't make a new hire be the sacrificial lamb that your workforce learns around. That's a lot of burden to put on somebody who's just trying to come into work. Just trying to do their job.

Training is huge. Lived experience training, especially if you can get some folks in with varying degrees. Lived experience. Sometimes some folks just need to see it. Honestly, they just haven't, whatever industry they're in, they just, their mind just, they haven't seen the different ways that you can get to A to B in a career.

And they only know what's been familiar to them, and therefore they fall into this. This is a very normal, very human thing to do. We fall into this belief system that the way we know how to do something is the only way to do something. But if they can see that there's other ways of achieving it – we do this thing with Lego.

So part of our development program was looking at new technologies to incorporate into our processes to break down that invisible wall. And one of those Lego series play that we've been dabbling in, super fun, actual Lego bricks, just like the kinds we played with growing up, but using them to initiate conversations, to facilitate focus groups, things like that.

And we use it in onboarding. I give everybody 6 bricks – 6 Lego bricks – 4 yellow, 2 red. And they're given a one minute countdown and they have to build a duck. That is the only instruction, build duck. And no matter how many people in the room, I've done it with 2, I've done it with 300 at once. You end up with all different ducks, every single time. 6 bricks.

And I always tell them, did you have the same equipment? Yes. Did you have the same time constraints? Yes. Did you have the same instruction? Yes. And yet we ended up with infinite number of different ducks. Yes. Cool. So now we understand that there's not only one way to build a duck.

And it's this little computing moment that goes on in people's heads. They're like, oh yeah, oh, okay. And they realize that the end goal is to revolutionize regional rail here. It's not to do this task the same way that this other person did. And once people can get their heads around that concept, suddenly the idea of accommodating for different disabilities is not scary.

It's just different. It's really cool to watch happen.

[Glen concludes the interview and thanks Kristen]

Thank you so much. This has been great. Thank you so much for the interview today. And I think we learned a lot about what ONxpress is doing and a lot of great initiatives.

[Kristen thanks Glen]

Thanks. We're trying.

[Glen thanks Kristen again]

Thank you so much, Kristen.

[Glen finishes the podcast episode by mentioning the following information. The upbeat music at the start of the episode plays again]

If you like this podcast, be sure to subscribe and share. For more resources and to learn about supporting people experiencing disabilities, visit supportedemployment dot c a.

- Transcript of 15 minute and 59 second Podcast Season 4 audio file titled "ONxpress Podcast v.1 - Final Cut"