

CSE Podcast Final CASE

[Upbeat music plays briefly. Then Abilities at Work podcast interviewer Glen Walsh begins speaking. He introduces Communications Security Establishment Canada – C S E – Senior Advisor to the Deputy Minister, Emma Sobel]

Hello and welcome to Abilities at Work, a podcast hosted by the Canadian Association for Supported Employment.

Coming up next, we are going to hear from Emma Sobel from Communications Security Establishment Canada.

Could you introduce yourself, including your name and your position, and tell us more about Communications Security Establishment Canada?

[Emma answers]

Sure! My name is Emma Sobel, and I work here at C S E as our senior advisor to the Chief – which is what we call our Deputy Minister – on equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility and that means I oversee our mandate at large but there are lots of different people in our organization doing this kind of work and I make sure that it all is happening and continues to happen and that we are evolving the workplace to be the best it can be in this space, which is particularly important to our Chief, Chief Caroline Xavier, who is the first Black Deputy Minister – man or woman in Canada. So, I am well-supported, and their position is well-supported in that particular mandate.

C S E is the Communications Security Establishment and we protect Canadians from all sorts of threats, but our domain is cyber. So, we do helping protect infrastructure, we help protect Canada through something called Signals intelligence, which is understanding how signals work and signals is anything media - your phone, your computer, all of the networks and this organization helps protect Canadians from threats to all of those.

[Glen responds and then asks another question]

Well, that is great. So why does the culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion matter to C S E?

[Emma replies]

We find that in our particular mission, which is a complex mission and it requires a lot of collaboration, a lot of diversity, a lot of different kinds of perspectives and minds around the table working together to protect Canadians that it is very important to have all of the types of Canadians that live in this country in one place solving these problems together.

So that includes employees with disabilities, that includes racialized employees, it includes Indigenous employees, and it is important for us to be able to leverage all of that talent to the best of its ability and make sure we are getting not just their brains and the talent they bring to the operation but the way that they live in the world to be able to deliver on what is a really important mission to Canadians and the style of working that makes that possible.

[*Glen briefly summarizes and proceeds with another question*]

So especially including people in terms of all types of equity and inclusion. So in this section like intelligence and IT security, workers may be hesitant, I guess, to self-identify as experiencing disability. How would you address these concerns?

[*Emma answers*]

I would like to say self-identification is a bit of your organizational canary and it will let you know if you are doing a good job with your employees around inclusion and trust and making sure their needs are met because people will not usually tick that box unless they feel there is a reason for them to do that that is beyond the organization getting a checkbox.

Organizations want this data, it is important to have the data, but more and more employees will not do that if they think the organization is using that data for their own credit and not to benefit them.

We have had really great success with our affinity groups – we call them affinity groups. In some organizations they call them employee resource groups or networks. We have 13 of those. One is a persons with disabilities group, we also have a neurodiversity group or a reactive neurodiversity group and they have conversations with us, with the organization and work with –

[*She quickly corrects herself before continuing*]

in partnership with the organization to let us know how we can continue to improve and how we can continue to meet their needs.

And the more we establish this ongoing dialogue, the more we are able to - first of all, meet their needs, but let them know that they can be in conversation with us and we saw that number jump 8% this year in self-identification statistics in general, and as we -

[*Emma briefly clarifies*]

our disability statistics a few years ago jumped from 7% to 13%.

And that is because of, I think, the leadership that those people in those communities are doing with their own communities and helping the organization to understand them. So we have brought in measures to help them through that dialogue. For instance, we have now a sponsorship program that is in its second year, that includes employees that are racialized and employees with disabilities, that helps them to navigate the system and advance their own careers here.

We have scooters, we have a growing accessibility center, we are trying to grow that through the implementation of something called G C Passport, which is something that will allow employees with disabilities to go through the system - transfer from job to job without needing to relitigate their accommodation needs, which is huge for that community, and there is –

[Emma quickly corrects herself]

we are in an open space environment here. So, different measures – a sit - stand desk, ergonomic chairs, little covers for your computers to deal with light sensitivity – so all of those -

[She clarifies]

every time we hear about something that would help that community, we try our best to devise a solution or buy a solution or help them to work in their best way here.

Assistive technologies I will say is something that has been particularly –

[Emma briefly clears up what she is trying to say next and continues speaking]

we have done a good job with – making what is available very public and making sure people have the assistive software they need to do their jobs, which is particularly important in our landscape which is – it is all tech, so we can think of us as a bit of an IT company, so that way of working is really important.

[Glen responds and then asks another question]

No, that is great. Can you go a little bit more into recruitment, onboarding, or career advancement? I know you talked a little bit about it, but are there any other policies at C S E I guess you would like to share?

[Emma answers]

Sure, so we have something called an Accessibility Ambassador. That is a person who will help somebody through the recruitment process and make sure that people have what they need from an accommodation perspective as they go through our onboarding process and

our recruitment process. We have policies around ensuring they ask for accommodations upfront so if you need accommodation, there is a spot for you to let us know and we will make sure that that happens and then educating those front line workers around offering morning and afternoon time slots, making sure there is time for breaks if needed, maybe offering for the chair to be in a different spot in the room for those that have eye contact needs.

All of those different ways that it shows up to have a disability, we make sure we are continually updating policies to provide as many options as we can and that is an evolving process. But as far as onboarding goes, we have guides for managers, many guides - we have an inclusive meetings guide, we have an inclusive recruitment guide, we have updated all of the posters and the language to be inclusive and accessible language so that you can put it into a screen reader and that is really easy to do and then as soon as employees get here, we want them to feel welcomed.

We want our managers to make them feel welcome, we want them to know that if they need to ask for an accommodation, that is an easy process and someone will help you through it, and there is a group that you can start to get in touch with, a disabilities affinity group, where there is a community of people that might –

[Emma proceeds to her next point]

or a neurodiversity community that is either advocating for your needs or who you will find community with. We have lots of events around all this stuff. We want your experience from recruitment to when you come in through those doors and start working to be as smooth as possible and we know that for the disability community, in particular, it is the fluidity of an experience that becomes a challenge and so we continue to work towards making that fairly seamless in whatever way we can.

[Glen responds and then asks another question]

Yeah, it sounds like you have a lot of innovative approaches. Are there any other programs you are very excited about?

[Emma answers]

I will talk a little more about the sponsorship program which is a very exciting program that we launched, we piloted last year, just with our racialized and Indigenous communities. We had 15 applicants that we matched with our A D and level Cadre and they worked together for a year with intensive mentorship and sponsorship and helped to navigate and 14 of those 15 employees earned advancement opportunities as a result of that program and

because of that, we decided to formalize that so that is now a program that will continue be in our shop and we have expanded it to persons with disabilities this year.

That is a way for people to overcome some of the systemic barriers that we know that they encounter, especially in large organizations that are a little bureaucratic, like the government. We need some way to help hear what those communities need and to eliminate the systemic barriers that they come up against and so the sponsorship program we have seen is a really effective way to do that, and so we are quite excited about this program.

And another one, we have our new Indigenous Career Navigator Program, which is a brand-new role for Indigenous folks that will help to navigate those careers. So if you are Indigenous and you come to our organization, there is a person that is just for you, that can help you culturally and from a place of cultural understanding, work through your career at C S E and so, no matter what level you go to or where you start and where you end up, there is a person there that can help you navigate that system.

So that is exciting. And we have obviously our affinity groups –

[There is a split-second audio disconnect which then clears up]

There is that flagship program, I will say, and those communities are really important at C S E. We put them at our governance tables, those leads and we make sure that they have voices at our decision-making tables so that what they need is not buried in the ground. We really try to surface it and put it in front of decision-makers and our Chief personally oversees the committee – chairs the committee where those affinity groups come so they have an opportunity to talk directly to the most important and key decision maker in the organization on a monthly basis.

[Glen responds and asks a final question]

Okay, great so we have the last question here. It has been great interviewing you and we have learned so much so far. What is some additional information you would like to share about building a disability-inclusive workplace?

[Emma answers]

I think the future is just so exciting in the accessibility space. It is one of the areas that I am particularly most excited to be innovative about because there is so much opportunity there with A I coming in with what we do, and the nexus with technology and accessibility, we know that there is so much happening in that space and we are excited to be able to learn how to do that in a secure environment.

So, for instance we do not have any Bluetooth in our environment at all. So in the past we have not been able to allow things like hearing aids or medically assistive devices, and we are really starting to tackle that as an organization and say what is possible? What can we do to give the absolute best quality of life to people working in our environment?, the same as they would get anywhere else even though we have these limitations as a security organization. We have been forming relationships with international partners, with domestic partners, who are doing great work in this space to say – what can we learn? What can we do? How can we use the great innovative capacity we have in this building to do something in the accessibility landscape?

We are already starting to see results there, but it is something for me personally that I am very excited to put a lot of energy towards and we cannot do that unless we have those folks who have lived experience to come in and help us and really work with the organization. If you want to be part of an organization where you both get to come to work and use the best of what you have to offer to help us innovate in this space, then we would love to have you.

[*Glen thanks Emma*]

Well thank you so much joining me today - it has been a great interview.

[*Emma responds*]

Thank you so much for interviewing me. It has been lovely to be on the podcast!

[*Glen thanks Emma again*]

Ok, thank you so much. Bye for now.

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

If you liked this podcast, be sure to subscribe and share. For more resources and to learn about supporting people experiencing disabilities, visit supportedemployment.org.

- Transcript of 12 minute and 40 second Podcast Season 4 audio file titled “CSE Podcast Final CASE”