



Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

Success stories

Sobeys Inc.

A Canadian case study in diversity and inclusion

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Sobeys Inc.: A Canadian success story in diversity and inclusion

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Sobeys recognizes that awareness and understanding are the keys to inclusion among its employees

Sobeys Inc., established in 1907 in Stellarton, Nova Scotia, began as a meat delivery business and has grown to become the second largest national grocery chain in Canada. Today, Sobeys, its franchises and affiliates have approximately 125,000 employees in 1500 stores across the country. Serving 900 diverse communities nationally, Sobeys believes in creating respectful and supportive workplaces that attract and retain a workforce that is representative of the communities they serve. In every store, Sobeys is committed to providing an environment where every employee feels included and valued for the unique talents and perspectives they bring to the organization.

As an organization that is committed to creating a respectful and supportive workplace, it is no surprise that when an employee announced her decision to undergo gender re-assignment, Sobeys ensured that they were providing a safe work environment for this employee throughout and after her transition.

“We don’t have a specific LGBTQ program and this wasn’t just about transgender employees. This is our general position regarding everyone who is a part of our organization. It’s about how you treat all employees. We are all unique, and we all need to feel safe and comfortable, and know that we have the same opportunities as the person sitting next us.”

Shirley Mayer, Manager, Talent Management

Identifying uniqueness

It is often believed that transgender individuals do not exist in one’s own organization, thus, no changes in HR policy are necessary. The truth is that people who identify as transgender are more common than one might realize. Research shows that approximately one out of 30,000 males and one out of 100,000 females is transgender¹.

¹ Schneider, M., Petersen, M., Hashmall, J. "Working with Transgendered Clients," a presentation to the 21st Annual Guelph Sexuality Conference. (With permission from J. Hashmall), posted on "Workplace transition support document - Transgender Employee - Frequently Asked Questions" at Sobeys, 2015.

Transgender inclusion in the workplace is an issue many companies are working with in a variety of contexts. Organizations such as Sobeys have been creating a positive work environment to ensure all employees and customers feel free to be their genuine selves in the workplace and in their stores. “When people don’t have to live in fear for their physical or mental well-being, they can spend their time more effectively, working individually or collaboratively in an engaging environment. Affirming difference, fostering diversity, and cultivating inclusivity creates strength in any organization.”²

In their efforts to support the implementation of institutional and social change, City of Toronto agency, The 519, states, “It takes a lot of energy for people to constantly hide important parts of their lives, which can impact someone’s ability to be fully productive at work. Inclusion contributes to a more engaged work environment.”³

Creating open and safe conversations through awareness

In March of 2015, a Sobeys corporate employee made a life altering decision to “come out” at work, letting her employer and co-workers know that she was transgender and planning to transition to the gender with which she identified. Having spent most of her life covering her gender identity and living as a male, being able to come to work without covering her authentic self, was something that this employee described as life changing.

The first person this employee spoke openly with about being transgender was a colleague at work, who encouraged her to speak with her manager. Initially concerned about the response she would receive by opening up to her employer, she recounts feeling relieved by her manager’s supportive reaction and appreciative of the commitment that the organization made to support her through her gender transition.

After sharing her story with her manager, she was asked how the organization could support her to make the transition at work as comfortable and as safe as possible – a simple action that reinforced the deep respect that Sobeys has for each individual person.

In response, the employee had three requests:

1. She wanted to be the one to tell her story
2. She stressed the importance of providing transgender awareness training with specific groups in the organization
3. She wanted to be kept informed on the organization’s plan from an administrative standpoint (telephone directory, e-mail, business cards, benefits, etc.)

Recognizing that the organization did not have extensive experience supporting transgender employees through gender transition, the first step HR took was to reach

² Hixson-Vulpe, Jack. Creating Authentic Spaces. A gender identity and gender expression toolkit to support the implementation of institutional and social change. The 519. 2011.

³ Ibid

out to Employee Assistance Provider, Morneau Shepell. Morneau Shepell had an internal consultant who specialized in LGBTQ awareness training, and who had previous experience supporting other organizations with similar situations.

Together, the employee and HR partnered with their EAP provider to create a plan that would fulfill the employee's three requests in the following way:

The employee wanted the opportunity to share her story herself and in person: With input from HR and EAP, the employee decided on the timing of when she would share her story with her Leadership Team and her colleagues. In this meeting, she had the opportunity to share her personal story and explain that when she returns to the office following a two-week vacation, she would no longer be using the male name that she had lived her life using, but would return to the office using the female name with which she identified.

The employee stressed the importance of Awareness Training: For this request, the approach differed slightly given the audience. The employee's Leadership Team and colleagues were asked to attend mandatory, instructor-led awareness training provided by Morneau Shepell. In addition to these sessions, a Gender Awareness Guide, including Frequently Asked Questions, was developed and provided to all employees at the director level and above in the Regional Office where the employee worked. Leaders were encouraged to share this information with their teams during regular team meetings. The FAQ provided valuable tips on how to best support this employee and to ensure she would be returning to a work environment in which she would feel safe and comfortable. These questions ranged from, "What kind of changes can we expect to see from the employee when she returns from vacation" and "what bathroom will she use?" to some of the more sensitive questions such as "what do I say to someone who tells me that this is against his or her religious belief?" and, "As a manager, what do I say to someone who makes derogatory comments?"

The employee wanted to be kept informed: During the period that the employee was on her vacation, all documentation, email addresses, telephone directory information, etc. was changed to the female name that the employee would be using going forward. In addition to the internal administrative changes, the organization also sent out letters notifying vendors with whom the employee frequently worked, about her decision to transition and the company's position on this.

Advancing together

When approached in late 2016 by Shirley Mayer, Manager, Talent Management at Sobeys, about sharing this story with CCDI, the employee was more than happy to have her story shared.

"Thanks for including me in this. Practically everyone I tell my story to asks about how work took the news. I can't say enough about how Sobeys made a huge difference in my life. I think that it is so important to talk about it and share positive experiences."

When asked what it was like returning to work openly as her genuine self, the employee shared a story about walking into the women's restroom for the first time. She described feeling nervous about who would be in there and what the reaction would be. She recounted how one woman simply looked up, and said "hi, how are you?".

If asked what three things organizations should do to support an employee through a gender transition, Sobeys would say:

- **Always Ask:** Never assume that you, as the organization, know what will be best for an employee who is making a decision like this, and don't be afraid to ask them what they will need to feel safe, valued and respected.
- **You don't always have to be the expert:** If this is not an area that your organization has experience with, make sure that you partner with someone who does.
- **Remove barriers through awareness:** Understanding is the first step to accepting. In this situation, transgender awareness training was the first step in making sure that our employees had the tools that they needed to be accepting and supportive of their colleague through her gender transition.

The Success Story Initiative

There is astonishingly little published that shines a light on diversity and inclusion successes in Canada, though there are many, across a wide range of organizations. Case studies referenced by trainers and leadership tend to be reporting on different countries, cultures, political and economic settings.

The goal of this initiative is to support diversity and inclusion leadership with stories that are relevant to what's happening now, here in Canada. By sharing their stories, we celebrate the successes of Canadian organizations while contributing to learning for everyone that cares about diversity and inclusion.

The employers who have developed initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion as priorities in the workplace are responding to an increasingly competitive economy that's responsive to the diversity of employees – and the country. We are grateful to those who have participated in interviews.

This series of case studies will be published monthly through 2016. Subscribing to our monthly newsletter at ccdi.ca will keep you updated with the latest case studies, which will all be posted online at ccdi.ca/successstories. For more information, contact mail@ccdi.ca.

The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion

The CCDI has a mission to help the organizations we work with be inclusive, free of prejudice and discrimination – and to generate the awareness, dialogue and action for people to recognize diversity as an asset and not an obstacle.

Through the research, reports and toolkits we develop and our workshops, events and workplace consultations, we're helping Canadian employers understand their diversity, plan for it and create inclusion.

CCDI's leadership has a proven model that's cultivated trust as an impartial third party. Our expertise is focused on the topics of inclusion that are relevant in Canada now and the regional differences that shape diversity.

A charitable organization that thinks like a business, we have created a niche with our innovative research technology and data analysis that brings a deeper understanding of Canadian diversity demographics and mindsets at any given moment.

CCDI is grateful for the support of Employer Partners across Canada. For enquiries, contact Susan Rogers, Chief Client Officer, Susan.Rogers@ccdi.ca or (416) 968-6520, ext 103.

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