



Best employers for diversity

April 03, 2008

Many companies are discovering the benefits of hiring and supporting a diverse workforce. Canada's Best Diversity Employers recognizes leaders in this area.

Read the full list of the Top 25 and selected feature stories below on employers that are finding innovative ways to foster and support diversity in their places of work.

The Top 25

Read a list and brief profiles of the leading diversity employers.

The selection process

Top companies don't just talk about diversity. Elite firms know variety in the workplace makes good business sense

TD Canada Trust: Disabled employees can bank on support

Assistance ranges from ergonomic furniture to specialized software

Catholic Children's Aid Society: A reflection of our society

Flexible hiring practices and inclusive policies help CCAS maintain a happy, stable workforce

Blake, Cassels & Graydon: Law firm committed to the principles of workplace diversity

Female associate feels 'comfortable and valued' as part of the team

Proctor & Gamble: A focus on the individual

Consumer products company considers diversity 'a competitive advantage,' says Toronto HR director

KPMG: Culture of openness boosts productivity

Accounting firm knows welcoming atmosphere has a positive impact on the bottom line

HSBC Bank Canada: Extending a helping hand

Bank program takes aim at recruiting, mentoring aboriginal employees

Toronto Police Service: Police are on the lookout for top recruits

Officers staff booths at job fairs, community events to meet and encourage prospective new applicants





A reflection of our society

Flexible hiring practices and inclusive policies help CCAS maintain a happy, stable workforce

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ELVIRA CORDILEONE
STAFF REPORTER

Nyron Sookraj stood out when the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto hired him as a social worker in 1979.

"I was one of a few people of colour in the agency," Sookraj says. "I was a rarity among the clients in child welfare.

"But from the day I started, I never felt left out of the equation. I felt that despite my colour, I was appreciated."

Over the ensuing three decades, the agency slowly refashioned itself. It not only began hiring people to reflect the changing face of Toronto, it also adopted formal policies to ensure visible-minority employees received the same treatment Sookraj experienced.

Sookraj, 58, has spent his entire professional career with the CCAS, including more than 20 years on the front lines. Today, he heads a staff of 75 as manager of the agency's north office.

A native of Guyana, he came to Canada in 1974 after a short stint in England. Within five years, he had earned a bachelor's degree in sociology at the University of Guelph and a master's degree in social work from Sir Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo.

He left school and walked straight into the agency's Dufferin Mall branch. After five years, he had moved into a supervisory position – a rarity for people of colour in the mid-1980s.

"I was one of the first to become a senior leadership person in Ontario," Sookraj says. "I became a role model."

The effort to reflect the city's diverse mix took enormous effort and time, beginning in 1984, says Terry Daly, the agency's director of human resources.

She says the work meant delving into the "nitty-gritty" of how the organization did things in order to come up with a plan, which then took seven years to implement.

"It resulted in a shift in the organization's culture, reflecting the values and culture of the society it services," she says.

Perhaps even more important, Daly says the shift in corporate attitude profoundly changed the way staff interacted with clients.

"As staff began to feel included in key decisions, they turned around and treated clients the same way."

Today, more than a third of the society's 600-person staff describe themselves as visible minorities, with fluency in 47 languages. Visible minorities also comprise a third of management.



RON BULL/TORONTO STAR

When Nyron Sookraj joined the Catholic Children's Aid Society in 1979, he was one of few people of colour at the Toronto agency.

The organization reached its hiring goals without resorting to targets. From the start, Daly says the CCAS hired to reflect the people it served. And as Toronto's demographic picture changed – and continues to change – so does the range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the people the agency recruits.

The CCAS recruits through agencies that serve immigrant groups and through schools where newcomers go to upgrade foreign credentials, such as Ryerson University's bridging program.

When considering a candidate, Daly says recruiters take into account not only equivalent education earned abroad but also whether the person has work experience that could add to the overall qualifications.

Once hired, employees get a chance to move up the ranks through formal training and equal access to on-the-job learning, such as working with interns as field instructors.

Daly says the agency also tries to make the workplace more inclusive through well-defined, well-enforced policies on such things as harassment, including a soon-to-be-implemented policy on respect in the workplace.

Although that may sound highly regulated, Daly says management doesn't impose rules from on high. Staffers have a place at the table – literally – in developing policy, and the society also seeks feedback through regular surveys.

Add generous vacation time, paid days off, unpaid leave allowances, parental leave top-up payments, an extended maternity leave program, a pension plan with employer contributions, tuition subsidies for ongoing education and extensive in-house training, and you get one of the lowest employee turnover rates in the province, Daly says.

"It's a tough type of work, so the low turnover is even more remarkable," she notes.

In fact, while similar organizations report annual staff turnover rates of 12 to 18 per cent, Daly says the CCAS stood at 6.7 per cent last year (due to a large number of retirements), up from 3.9 per cent in 2006.

The number was a hefty 25 per cent when Daly joined the society in 1985.

But she says her work isn't done yet.

"We keep looking at it through a different lens each time. And each time it becomes clearer and clearer."