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Flexibility a boon to employees

Canadian firms make big gains on diversity front

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As a mother and a professional woman moving up the corporate ladder at a large public accounting firm, Andrea Boulden needed an employer that understood her unique needs and supported her in managing her busy life.

Boulden is the mother of a six-year-old boy with Tourette's syndrome and bipolar disorder, and the organizational challenges she faces balancing work and family can be considerable. But it is in Boulden's favour that she's working for one of the country's Top 25 Best Diversity Employers -- KPMG -- according to Mediacorp's first annual ranking in this area.

"I don't think I could work for a company that wasn't this way because we have so many doctor's appointments and commitments because of his disorder. So we need this type of flexible work arrangement," says Boulden. She notes her boss always says she's a "mom first" and that she uses the company's many diversity and flexibility policies to accommodate her needs.

Canada's best diversity employers have made huge strides in the past five years. Leading companies recognize the tight labour market, aging workforce and increased reliance on hiring from around the world requires them to target diversity initiatives in more specialized ways.

"In the past five years, we've definitely seen a much broader awareness of the importance of diversity in the workplace," says Michael Bach, KPMG's director of diversity. "It's not just a numbers game and a legislative requirement. It's about diversity of thought and how that adds to the bottom line to benefit a business."

Diversity comes in many forms, and companies demonstrating the best practices realize they have to tap into all aspects of diversity, whether it's related to gender, age, cultural or ethnic background, sexual orientation or disabilities. "The advent of same-sex marriage was one thing that really catapulted all diversity into the spotlight," says Bach. "It's not just about special interest groups, it's about equity and equality and embracing differences."

To be part of the Top 25 Best Diversity Employers competition, companies submitted their names or were nominated by third parties. Mediacorp poured through hundreds of applications in the review process and examined corporate programs and policies in five key areas of diversity: women, visible minorities, handicapped or disabled individuals, aboriginal Canadians, and gay and lesbian employees. It rated the programs using evaluation criteria designed to determine how effectively the programs impacted the intended groups, the longevity of programs and the extent of the company's investment in diversity initiatives.

Mediacorp's first report on the best diversity employers shows companies are making big gains on the diversity front with equal gains in financial health and long-term sustainability.

"The larger picture is that it's simply good for business in terms of recruitment to be

reflective of your community and sensitive to the needs of specific communities," says Richard Yerema, editor of Canada's Top 100 Employers for Mediacorp.

Research has demonstrated repeatedly that diversity in the workplace improves innovation, productivity and morale, reduces turnover and ultimately benefits the bottom line. Several research studies have reached the same conclusion, and Canadians seem to agree.

A national Leger Marketing survey of 1,000 Canadians, sponsored by Xerox Research Centre of Canada, shows that 77 per cent of Canadian workers feel diversity in culture and background contributes to innovation and creates a stronger business landscape.

When Steven Watts, an accountant born and educated in India, came to Canada in 1998 through a global transfer within the KPMG family, the awareness level of diversity issues in a business and professional context just wasn't the same.

"Back then, we didn't have all these formal policies," he says, adding there was no clear path to foreign credential recognition for the chartered accounting designation he earned in India.

After being rejected by the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants (CICA) the first time, he wrote the U.S. version of the exam and approached the institute again. This time, he had the support of two senior partners and, after a few more exams, earned his Canadian CA designation.

Watts uses his experience inside KPMG to mentor and educate others about the foreign credential recognition process.

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