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Vive la différence

Companies that embrace diversity improve morale, foster innovation

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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 who understood her particular needs and supported her in managing her busy life.

Ms. 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 Ms. 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 Ms. 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 Mr. Bach. "It's not just about special interest groups, it's about equity and equality and embracing differences."

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 that 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.

Mr. Watts is using his experience inside KPMG to mentor and educate others about the foreign credential recognition process and now sits on the CICA committee that evaluates overseas professionals' credentials.

Andrea York, co-chair of the Equity and Diversity Committee at the law firm Blake, Cassels and Graydon LLP in Toronto, sees diversity as impacting every part of the business.

"We see diversity as a business imperative," she says. "We draw our strength from diversity and we have accountability for diversity initiatives resting at the senior leadership level."

Canada's Best Diversity Employers serve as an example to the rest of corporate Canada how diversity helps companies thrive, particularly in a hot labour market.

"The lesson here is that you can do these things and it's a necessary aspect of running a business in Canada -- it's not a frill," says Mr. Yerema.

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