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Michael Bach, national director for KPMG's diversity initiative.

Kevin Van Paassen/The Globe and Mail

Diversity

Mental health the final frontier in diversity

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When Michael Bach has a bad day he doesn't lie to his boss about where he is. The national director of diversity, equity and inclusion for KPMG LLP Canada, who's lived with depression for his entire adult life, can call and say, "I woke up in the grey cloud today so I'm going to work from home."

"He won't have a problem with that," says Mr. Bach. "Depression isn't something I chose. I can still be recognized for being a great contributor to the firm."

Mr. Bach doesn't consider this as special treatment but sees it as treating everyone the same while acknowledging that we all work differently. For example, people who have back injuries may need desks that go up and down so they can stand at times.

His is just a different accommodation.

"The reason I'm very open about it is because I want to set a tone within the firm that living with depression doesn't make you a lesser person," says Mr. Bach. "It's absolutely imperative for leaders to come out and talk about their own invisible disabilities to set the example. I want to send the message that it's okay, right from day one when we're recruiting, that you can bring your whole self to work, whatever that looks like."

Roughly 15 per cent of Canadians live with a disability, but that figure is expected to rise significantly as the population ages and medical advances help people live longer. Other factors expected to bump up that number include a broader perception of how we define disabilities and increased social acceptance about reporting them. Statistics Canada tells us that in the next decade, seniors could outnumber kids for the first time, changing the face of the workplace. For Canadians aged 15 to 64, pain was the most common form of disability, followed closely by mobility and agility issues.

In 2005, when the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) was first introduced, it sent a wake up call across the province as well as across Canada about what business needs to do to accommodate people with disabilities. Other standards are following in stages creating a more accessible workplace for all, an opportunity many of Canada's Best Employers for Diversity have already embraced, widening their talent pool and reflecting their communities. The scope is ambitious. Disabilities go beyond physical issues such as

mobility, or visual or hearing impairment. According to Canada's Employment Equity Act, a recognized disability can be a mental, psychiatric, sensory or learning disability, a disease or chronic condition.

While Mr. Bach emphasizes that disclosure about a disability at KPMG is strictly voluntary, what's key is creating an environment where people can talk about it. To raise people's awareness around mental health, the company has posted information on their website, used internal communication tools to talk about it and had their employee assistance provider come in to explain how to get help, particularly under stressful conditions.

"Mental health is the last frontier that most companies haven't tackled yet," says Mr. Bach, who gives full credit to Bell Canada for its recently launched campaign around mental health. "It just comes down to good people management."

As part of Bell's five-year, \$50-million national initiative around community mental health services, Halifax-based Bell Aliant is trying to get people talking about mental health issues to remove some of the stigma that still sticks.

Nationally, Nova Scotia has the highest percentage of people reported as living with a disability – 20 per cent, or one in five. The company already has a support system in place for employees facing mental and physical challenges, and fosters an inclusive work environment by trying to maximize the full benefit of all the talent in their company.

"The anecdotal feedback we're receiving for Bell's "Let's Talk" campaign from our employees and the community suggests it's phenomenally successful," says Alana Patterson, vice-president of human resources at Bell Aliant. "I'm also picking up on a huge amount of pride from employees. It's sparked the dialogue that it was meant to spark both inside and outside the workplace."

Nan Oldroyd, vice-president of human resources for Loblaw Cos. Ltd. from Ontario to Atlantic Canada, says the public perception is often that it's a great difficulty or very costly to accommodate people with disabilities. But she finds a lot of disabilities extremely easy to accommodate. As someone who has individuals with disabilities on her own team, she has firsthand experience.

"Sometimes it's as simple as giving them a little more flexibility on their starting time or ensuring that they're getting breaks at a consistent time," says Ms. Oldroyd. "As a leader, I think I have an obligation to make them feel comfortable and to really open up that two way dialogue about what their needs are. The conversation naturally evolved as we got to know each other better."

KPMG also deals with accommodation on an individual basis, with an average one-time cost of about \$500, according to Mr. Bach.

"Some things are more expensive, like if you had to put in visual fire alarms for people with hearing impairment throughout the entire office, but the majority are very low cost," says Mr. Bach. "For example, a license for software such as JAWS for the visually impaired is a one-time cost of \$300."

Other accommodations, such as the width of a doorway to allow for wheelchairs, are built into building standards. Becoming compliant with the AODA is not a huge undertaking, says Mr. Bach, and diversity has a positive effect on the company's bottom line.

"If you become the bank of choice for the disabled community, you're not only attracting the people living with disability, but the friends and family affected by it," says Mr. Bach. "It's an opportunity because there are so many people affected by these small changes. We also get diversity of thought and experience so our teams are more productive, with more creative solutions to problems. These things add to our organization and that's a motivator for us."

TIPS

Start with recruitment: Connect with organizations such as the Job Opportunity Information Network to increase your talent pool. "We are looking for the best and the brightest, not to meet a quota," says Michael Bach, national director of diversity, equity and inclusion for KPMG LLP Canada. joininfo.ca/

Don't wait: "January 2012 may feel far away (for compliance with the AODA), but it's coming up quickly. Form a group or small committee to review your current policies and practices and set out tasks and timelines. The AODA website has a helpful guide that includes a checklist in a friendly format," says Christina Hall, a partner at Fraser Milner Casgrain LLP. <http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/en/mcass/programs/accessibility/ComplyingStandards/complianceManualCustomerService/tableOfContents.aspx>

Stay flexible: "Accessibility is not a stagnant process or a one-time thing. It's something that organizations are going to have to continue to evaluate on a go-forward basis," Ms. Hall says.