

For immediate release:

EMPLOYERS RECOGNIZED

Naomi Ludington, Outreach Coordinator for Literacy Now South Okanagan-Similkameen, says it's common for employers to be unaware that their employees struggle to read. "As a society, we expect people to read fluently," she says, "but more than 42 per cent of adults in this country find written instructions difficult to follow and have trouble completing basic forms."

Ludington says there are many reasons people don't learn to read. "We're seeing people who moved around a lot as children, missed out on the basics, and eventually dropped out of school. Others went through a relatively normal school life, but still didn't learn to read. Instead they developed a wide range of strategies to help them get by." In the workforce, these people may move from job to job frequently, quitting each time they become overwhelmed. Or they may stay in a familiar job until something changes, like new equipment with written instructions, or more paperwork. "People who know the job inside and out will even turn down promotions because they aren't sure they can manage the extra paperwork."

Some employers recognize that their employees may not read well (especially if they employ workers whose first language isn't English) and make accommodations like using pictures and symbols instead of words. Other employers like Frances Solguk of Osoyoos Home Hardware go the extra mile, intentionally hiring people with significant literacy issues.

When Zechariah Nyarza arrived in Osoyoos as a refugee from Sudan, he couldn't speak or read English. Solguk gave him the opportunity to earn while learning. "After a year, my English improved," he says. "I had to explain to customers and so my listening and speaking skills got better."

Solguk says it wasn't all smooth sailing. At first Nyarza found his job overwhelming, but she and her staff supported him through the tough spots. Solguk also realized Nyarza would benefit from more formal educational opportunities, so along with practical job-related training she sent him for tutoring at Okanagan College. Today Nyarza's goal is to earn his Grade 12 and eventually become a pastor. Although he moved to Penticton to be near the college, he still commutes to Osoyoos to work. This kind of employee loyalty doesn't go unnoticed by Solguk's customers.

When Tony Batista joined Solguk's team 22 years ago, she let her staff know there would be challenges and that she needed everyone to be on board. Batista has Down Syndrome and would be on a different learning curve; this would mean extra work for others. "It was not easy," she says. "We have had challenges, but we persevere and come together to make it work." Their perseverance paid off. Cheerful and outgoing, Batista is a loyal and reliable employee—and their most famous. People come from all over to see him.

"Businesses spend millions trying gain trust," says Solguk. "It's not about trying to make as much money as you can, it's the small acts of kindness. The positive spin-off is profit but you approach it indirectly. You take care of the people and create a comfortable, satisfying atmosphere—that leads to business success." Solguk says all of her employees have been with her for years. The bigger up-front investment in training pays off in the long run, and everyone reaps the benefit.

Ludington says it's important to recognize employers like Solguk, because they're a positive example of how other employers can do things differently. Anyone who would like to nominate an employer (and any employers who would like to share their own success stories) can contact Ludington at literacynowsos@gmail.com or 250.462.0636.

For more information, please contact

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