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Worktopia & Ready, Willing and Able: A National Collaboration

Building Bridges to Supports on the Pathway to Employment

Since 2016, two unique national initiatives known as **Worktopia** and **Ready, Willing and Able (RWA)** have been working together to meaningfully influence the employment futures of youth and young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism). Worktopia offers programs focused on improving employment readiness and enhancing the employment skills of individuals with autism, while RWA engages with Canadian businesses to help build inclusive workplaces that capitalize on the skills and abilities of neuro-divergent individuals who are actively seeking opportunities to join the workforce. Essentially, the two initiatives are striving to connect supply (“job seekers”) with demand (“employers”). Together, the programs strengthen the pathway to employment for job seekers, while helping employers expand their talent pipeline and create diverse and inclusive work environments.

Nadira Badri’s experience with both Worktopia and RWA showcases how working together helps us connect **talent** to Canadian businesses who are looking to **hire**.

Nadira’s Story

Three months after moving to Toronto from New Brunswick, Nadira Badri was anxious to explore opportunities and build connections in her new community. With encouragement from family, Nadira reached out to **RWA** to find out more about local supports available for people with autism seeking employment.

RWA worked closely with Nadira to explore options and connected her with **Worktopia’s EmploymentWorks Canada** (EWC) program hosted by the **Geneva Centre for Autism**.

On her first day attending the EWC program, Nadira was quickly overcome by a sense of belonging, remarking that everyone in the group is “exactly like I am.” The group spent Mondays in a classroom like setting building key employment-related skills, and spent Wednesdays exploring different jobs in a variety of industries to help identify areas of interest and aptitude. In March 2017, EWC partnered with Nathan Ladovsky, a local restaurateur, and his gastronome brother, Adam, to host a “Worktopia Social” and create an opportunity for EWC participants to explore the culinary arts. Hosted at The Depanneur, a unique rental space with a fully equipped kitchen and seating area, Nathan and Adam worked with the EWC group to plan, prep, cook and serve a full-service dinner to their 30+ guests.

Being a 4th generation operator of **United Bakers Dairy Restaurant**, Nathan saw a natural talent and enthusiasm in Nadira, as she quickly took the lead in key areas of food preparation and worked seamlessly with the rest of the team.





Nathan shared, *“in the hospitality industry, there's a principle called the "51% rule". It basically says that if you equally split a persona between technical ability and emotional awareness, it's better to have someone who has an extra 1% of emotional awareness. Why? Because you can teach anyone to flip an omelet, carry a plate, or enter orders, but you can't teach them to do it with a smile. It didn't take long for me to realize that Nadira is a 51%'er - she has a can-do attitude and willingness to learn - common traits exhibited by successful hospitality industry professionals.”*

Char Zozzolotto, the EWC facilitator, noted that *“Nadira’s cooking expertise quickly came into play and she caught Nathan’s attention as a reliable “sous-chef” in the kitchen. She was eager to learn and also demonstrated her way around the kitchen with her own culinary savvy. She took the lead on many of the tasks, helped her peers out when needed, provided her culinary know-how when it came to adding a little extra this or that, or if something needed 5 more minutes to cook.”*

The day following the hugely successful dinner service at The Depanneur, Nathan reached out and invited Nadira in for an interview and hired her on the spot. During her first few weeks, Nadira was mentored by a fellow employee, and since then her job with the United Bakers Dairy Restaurant has grown from one to four shifts per week. Nadira excels in her position – she is highly motivated to create a positive dining experience for the customers of United Bakers and values working alongside a great team.

Nathan shares, *“Our operational tempo can be intense at times. Our amazing staff work together to make it all happen, and Nadira has integrated herself well within the team. Nadira is a prep cook at the salad station, and she works an average of 25 hours per week. Her job requires her to read and organize bills quickly and efficiently. On each shift, Nadira must assemble and customize salads for seven servers. She alone ensures that each salad has the proper ingredients and the right dressing; it requires organization, dexterity, flexibility, and a sense of humour. During lunch and dinner, it's not uncommon for Nadira to have six or more salads in the queue, which she must prepare and then ensure that the correct salad leaves the kitchen with the correct server. Nadira is also responsible for stocking her station before and after each shift and maintaining its cleanliness at all times.*



Now, over one year later, I'm happy to see how much Nadira has grown and how she has proven herself to be a dependable member of our team. She is one of our most punctual staff members, and someone the whole staff appreciate. Her attitude and willingness to learn have enabled her to grasp the requirements of the job and to excel at what she does. She keeps one of the cleanest work areas and has demonstrated excellent growth in her ability to track and organize order tickets. It's a pleasure having Nadira as part of our workforce; we're lucky to have her!”

As a result of her positive experiences with Worktopia and RWA, Nadira has discovered a new passion for mentorship and public speaking, acting as a mentor and guest speaker for the EWC program and sharing her experiences as an invited speaker at events such as Autism Speaks 2 Young Professionals.



Char shared, “Nadira became a peer mentor to others in the [Worktopia] program as she identified with their struggles and anxiety. She instinctively provides support, shares her story and pays it forward by speaking to each of our groups since graduating from the program. This experience has fostered another rewarding yet daring endeavour into the world of motivational speaking. Nadira has many strong and powerful messages to share and at the recent Autism Speaks 2 Young Professionals event she brought the house down and captivated her audience: there were cheers and tears, a standing ovation and countless offers for employment support and opportunities.”

If you are interested in learning more about Worktopia or RWA, please click on the references provided below.



WORKTOPIA is a unique national initiative designed to improve the employment futures of youth and young adults living with autism. It offers three employment preparedness **programs focused on improving employment readiness and enhancing the employment skills of individuals with autism** between the ages of 15 to 29 as they transition from high school to independent adulthood. There are currently 12 leading autism and pan-disability service organizations located in 7 provinces across Canada engaged to deliver the Worktopia programs. The initiative is sponsored by [The Sinneave Family Foundation](#) and [Autism Speaks Canada](#), and is funded in part by the Government of Canada’s Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities Program. For more information, please visit www.worktopia.ca.



Ready Willing & Able (RWA) is a national partnership of the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL), the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance (CASDA) and their member organizations. Funded by the Government of Canada and active in each province and territory across the country, RWA is designed to support Canadian businesses in building an inclusive workforce that leverages the skills and qualifications of people with an intellectual disability or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). www.readywillingable.ca



EmploymentWorks Canada (EWC) is one of three newly developed Worktopia programs designed to support and advance young adults ages 15-29 with ASD who are out of high school toward sustained employment. It is an evidence-informed peer supported program that uses adult learning principals such as reflective practice, life-long learning, skills acquisition “in situ”, community engagement and integration to focus on developing the “essential skills” of participants in a group-setting and via workplace experiences in the community. www.worktopia.ca/employment-works/



United Bakers Dairy Restaurant is a four-generation family business that has been serving the Toronto community for over a century. Their specialties range from traditional Jewish dishes -- hearty soups, sumptuous spreads, and gefilte fish -- to fresh salads and more typical comfort foods like macaroni and cheese. Nathan explains, “We like to call ourselves *the restaurant that feels like home*. It's not uncommon for multiple generations - from new-borns to great-grandparents - to dine together at the same table.” We welcome you to join us for a meal, bring your kids or your parents, and make yourselves feel at home. www.unitedbakers.ca