

Celebrating Progressive Employers and Capable Employees: Manitoba First Nations Educational Resource Centre

By Sylvia Jansen

Great things happen when you are not afraid to try something new.

About eighty-five people work for the Manitoba First Nations Educational Resource Centre, most of them based in Winnipeg at offices on Sherwin Road. The Centre works with Manitoba First Nations schools in training, support, and professional development conferences. Led by Executive Director Lorne Keeper, these specialists make a difference for professionals in First Nations schools throughout the province.

Among the Centre's staff is Russ Hilsher, who lives with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Russ works part-time as an office assistant: he maintains the reception, office and staff kitchen areas; assists in filing and copying; handles recycling; and does other office tasks when needed. Before being approached by Premier Personnel, a supported employment agency, the Centre did not have such a job. With a bit of imagination and an honest, open attitude about challenges Russ faces, they developed a role that fills a need they never realized was there. That role now frees his colleagues to focus on their primary responsibilities. Russ also contributes to the work of the Centre by collaborating as a speaker about his own disability. He does his work well, and clearly enjoys it: "When I am at work, I feel as though my disability disappears," he says.

The position that Russ fills was initially worked into their budget as short-term only, says Delores McKay, Manager of Human Resources. With Russ's success at work, the position is now long-term. What advice would she give to other employers? "I would tell them not to be afraid," she says. "Be open to something new. Discuss issues, and be willing to accommodate." Delores is clear that with the right approach, everyone succeeds.

Many workplaces have tasks that can be done well by someone who lives with a developmental or intellectual disability. It only takes a bit of imagination. And not being afraid.



Russ and his support network: From left to right (back): Lorne Keeper, Russ Hilsher, Delores McKay, Jewel Reimer, (front): Nancy McNaughton, Elisa Barkman, Alex Stearns

Connecting Employers and People

People with disabilities can succeed when they are connected with the right employer and the right kind of work. Supported employment agencies exist to make successful connections. These agencies find good matches between people and employers, they help with training, and they provide ongoing support to employee and employer. All agency services are without cost to the employer. The agency that works with Russ is **Premier Personnel, (204) 949-1474, www.premierpersonnel.ca**.