



John Campbell / The Independent

CAMPBELLFORD – Mark Wafer has helped almost 50 people with a disability enter the workforce over the past 15 years by hiring them to work at his seven Tim Hortons franchises in Scarborough. He was a guest speaker at a Business Appreciation Breakfast hosted by Community Living Campbellford/Brighton. Jan. 19, 2011

## People with disabilities 'huge untapped pool of labour'

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TRENT HILLS - The country's growing shortage of workers would be less of a problem if more employers hired members of "Canada's largest minority" - people with disabilities, says the executive director of the Ontario Disability Network (ODN).

The disabled make up 16 per cent of the country's population, but the unfortunate reality and tragedy is that 70 per cent of those people are unemployed, ODN Executive Director Joe Dale told a small gathering of business people at the Campbellford Community Resource Centre on Jan. 18.

They (disabled) represent a huge untapped pool of labour that could help solve what both the Conference Board of Canada and Prime Minister Stephen Harper have said will be the country's number one economic problem this decade - an estimated one billion people shortfall in workforce participation, Mr. Dale said.

If this projection holds true, the result will be a lower standard of living for everyone, even those with a job, he said.

"In Ontario, 1.85 million people, one in seven people in the community, has a disability and that's slated to grow to one in five by 2020."

Taxpayers in the province spent \$3.2 billion on disability pensions last year and the cost has been growing by five per cent annually, Mr. Dale said. However, recipients receiving the maximum benefit get less than \$11,000 a year, so all those people are also living in poverty.

Mr. Dale blamed the general reluctance of employers to hire people with disabilities on a lack of understanding and education in the community about the value and contributions that those individuals can make in the workplace.

Mr. Dale and Mark Wafer, a Tim Hortons franchisee who has helped more than 50 people with a disability enter the workforce, were the keynote speakers at the at the 2011 Business Appreciation Breakfast hosted by Community Living Campbellford/Brighton.

Mr. Wafer offered up several telling statistics to counter many of the myths and misconceptions surrounding employees with disabilities: 96 per cent of them score average to above average in performance ratings; 86 per cent have above average attendance records; 97 per cent rate average to above average in terms of safety on the job; and they're also five times more likely to stay on the job than other workers.

That's important, Mr. Wafer said, because productivity suffers while new employees are trained.

"The cost of turnover is very high," he said.

Mr. Dale is also the manager of Rotary at Work, an initiative in which service club members assist people who have a disability find employment.

Mr. Wafer, who owns seven Tim Hortons franchises in Scarborough, was presented with the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters Innovator of the Year Award in 2010 and was recently inducted into Ontario's Champions League for his efforts to promote inclusion of people with a disability in the workplace.

The two men drew upon their own experiences to provide anecdotal evidence in support of their message.

Mr. Dale spoke about Noel, an electrical engineer who lost his job after his vision deteriorated. He was out of work for more than seven years until he got a job at a repair shop after the government paid \$600 for a large screen reader. Noel told Mr. Dale the job gave him back his life and allowed him to become independent once again.

Mr. Wafer hired Clint, a high school graduate with Down's Syndrome, at his first Tim Hortons more than 15 years ago.

"He became one of our best employees," he said.

People with disabilities have a wide array of abilities, Mr. Dale said, and with the help of agencies such as Community Living, can be matched to jobs that suit their skills.

"They're going to provide the training and job coaching for free," he said, as well as prescreen candidates at no cost "to make sure the right fit guarantees success."

And if the job placement doesn't work out, Community Living will help the person find other employment and take the pressure off you, Mr. Dale told the business owners.

There is no limit to the range of jobs they can do, he said.

"There are lots of reasons to get to know and understand disability better from a business perspective," Mr. Dale said.

See next week's paper for a story on one local business' success in employing a person with a disability.