



The following case study was produced as part of the research report "Success Themes in Supportive Employment". Copies of the full report are available online: [http://www.socialenterprisecanada.ca/en/learn/nav/SET\\_Report.html](http://www.socialenterprisecanada.ca/en/learn/nav/SET_Report.html)



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## STARWORKS PACKAGING & ASSEMBLING

### Overview

Starworks Packaging and Assembly is a social enterprise whose mission is to provide employment to individuals with developmental disabilities in the Vancouver area. Their mandate is to provide individuals with financial gain, an accessible work environment and skills suited to careers within other companies.

### Background

Starworks is a division of [Developmental Disabilities Association \(DDA\)](#), a non-profit association that provides services and programs to children, youths and adults in Vancouver and Richmond, British Columbia. DDA formally launched Starworks as a business in 2000 as an outgrowth of an assembly and packaging training program they had been running since the 1970's.

The enterprise employs approximately 50 on-call workers in its 5,000 square foot Vancouver warehouse, which handles work requiring high volume manual labour, such as contract packaging, fulfillment, kitting, and manual assembly.

Starworks receives no government funding and operates as a sustainable business, with profits redirected back into the business to employ more workers.

### Target Population for Employment

Starworks currently employs 46 people, 96% of whom have a developmental disability.

- 96% of target employees live receive Person with Disabilities Benefits from the Province and would be considered below the poverty line.
- 40% have mental health issues.
- 30% are inner-city residents, living in Vancouver's Downtown East Side
- 13% are hearing impaired

Other barriers to employment for Starworks' workforce include:

- Lack of work history – most employees have never worked, or have had numerous unsuccessful attempts at retaining employment
- Lack of education
- Lack of skills training
- Low literacy
- Language skills (many are newcomers to Canada)

### **The Employee Journey**

Starworks' employees work at packaging and assembling activities in long-term casual on-call positions.

#### **Recruitment**

Starworks is able to leverage DDA's employment division, Jobs West, to provide a ready pool of applicants. There is always more interest than positions available.

Starworks also posts available positions with local community colleges and other employment agencies that serve people facing barriers to employment. Postings are written in plain language, and do not have requirements that might render some people with developmental disabilities ineligible (for example, the requirement to possess a Grade 12 education).

#### **Working Interviews**

Many people, regardless of disability, find traditional interviews intimidating and unrelated to the actual work required. For people with communication challenges, a traditional interview may be very daunting and, as a result, not a useful measure of an individual's ability to perform on the job. To address this challenge, Starworks uses a *working interview*, which allows the individual the opportunity to demonstrate, rather than articulate, ability.

Candidates are given 2-4 hour interviews in which they receive an orientation, training, and time to practice with a job coach prior to a skilled time trial. In some cases, candidates are offered work experiences or a temporary trial period so they can reach the speed and quality required for hire.

#### **Hiring Materials**

All of Starworks' hiring materials are written in plain language, with limited text per page, and include visuals whenever possible. In addition to providing these materials to staff, a supervisor sits down with all new hires and reviews those materials with them to ensure comprehension. Hiring documents include:

1. Employee Handbook
2. Safety Handbook and Safety Video
3. Responsibility to Report Earnings Letter

#### 4. Letter of Hire

The Employee Handbook is a 12-page document that outlines employee responsibilities and expectations. It is written in plain language (simple, jargon free, short sentences) with minimal text per page and supporting visuals as appropriate. Topics include work schedule and breaks, warehouse safety, dress code, and vacations/sick time.

##### Training

Training is conducted using written materials, videos, pictures, and hands-on instructions. All training is conducted using plain language. Supervisors outlay expectations, assess speed and skill levels, and provide checklists that are simple for new hires to follow. More experienced employees are encouraged to provide help to less experienced employees.

The Warehouse Safety Video and Handbook is a multimodal training package that uses a combination of written, visual, and practical hands-on exercises in conjunction with a supporting video to train employees on basic warehouse safety. The intent is that through repetition of learning from a variety of learning styles in a practical environment, the materials will be more accessible and easily retained by employees. Topics include the importance of safety, an overview of the warehouse environment, tools, clothing, safe lifting, and procedures in case of injury.

The package includes a 10-minute training [DVD](#), a facilitator guide, a supervisor assessment survey, an employee quiz, and a take-home handbook written in plain language. The quiz is also written in plain language, with multiple-choice visual options (instructions are to circle the correct image).

Tasks are set up in an assembly line and broken down into one- or two-step processes, which works both from a training and efficiency perspective. For assembly jobs with multiple steps, a visual instruction sheet is created as a reference point for production staff. Employees may also work from a sample.

##### Daily Operations

All employee materials and daily operating procedures have built-in accommodations to make the work place accessible for individuals with cognitive delays and limited literacy.

One example of this is Starworks' workplace signage. Safety posters and symbols on the warehouse floor indicate workplace hazards and remind staff of safety procedures. In the lunchroom, employees are encouraged to get to know each other. Sign language "cheat sheets" are posted to encourage communication between those who sign and those who don't.

Starworks also provides position-specific manuals. For example, the warehouse safety officer is responsible for ensuring that the warehouse is safe and orderly on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. To make this position accessible to a target employee with limited or no literacy, the officer uses a binder with colour-coded sections to separate daily, weekly and monthly tasks, and pictorial checklists for each task. Tasks are broken down into the maximum number of steps with achievable goals.

### Scheduling

Starworks provides casual employment only. Employees indicate when and how many hours per week they want to work, and also when they are not available (e.g., some take time off for the Special Olympics, others are not available during winter months when mental health is more affected). The warehouse opens early in the morning to accommodate most employees' preference. Break times are flexible and frequent (between 1.5 – 2 hours).

### Attendance Management:

If employees do not come in when they are scheduled, supervisors will follow up with them. If an employee's attendance is intermittent, non-target staff will follow up to find out why and offer solutions to help them get back to work. For example, if an employee is struggling with elder care for his parents, staff can help connect their parents with appropriate services and life planning. DDA has a family support program and a Drop-In Centre that workers can access outside of work for life planning and life skills.

## **HR Practices**

### Wages and Benefits

Most target employees are employed at minimum wage plus 10% vacation pay. Employees with additional skills (e.g., shipping/receiving, safety officer) can earn higher wages. All target employees receive disability benefits, including healthcare benefits; so as not to detract from those benefits, bonuses are distributed in the form of non-monetary recognition.

### Vacation / Sick Time

Holidays and sick time are unpaid, but vacation time is included on each paycheque.

### Leave of Absence

Since all employees are casual part-time, they are able to take temporary leave for any reason, including working at part-time seasonal jobs.

### Performance Reviews / Promotions

Annual performance reviews are provided in plain language to all employees to discuss goal setting and review their progress. (If employees bring up non work-related issues, supervisors may address these informally, but generally the intention is to keep reviews job-focused.) Supervisors also provide ongoing performance reviews on a project-by-project basis. Starworks' management has acknowledged that the enterprise could benefit from a feedback system to make their performance evaluations more meaningful.

Starworks uses a Skills Matrix to identify possible tasks and skills for each employee as a basis for employee development planning.

Promotions are limited by the nature of the work and financial resources. When possible, they are made, based on skills and experience.

### Recognition

DDA recognizes Starworks' staff after 1, 5, 10 and 15 years of employment with a gift and an event at the head office. Supervisors also informally recognize workers' exemplary performance during normal work hours.

### Complaints

Starworks has a formal dispute resolution policy, and managers have an open door policy. For certain issues, managers may call on additional support such as parents, caregivers, interpreters or employment specialists. If the issue cannot be resolved with the manager, it moves up to DDA's Assistant Director of Employment Services, who oversees the entire operation. If the complaint still cannot be resolved, it moves up to the Director, Executive Director and Board of Directors, although this has never occurred.

### Discipline/Termination

Managers work with employees to improve a situation to the greatest extent possible rather than resort to discipline. For example, if an employee misses several months of work due to a mental health episode, this would be treated with understanding.

Termination occurs only after all attempts to assist the employee have been exhausted. Starworks will rehire terminated employees if circumstances have improved (e.g., a stabilization of mental health or housing situation) and the employee is interested in work again.

### Tenure

Most employees stay with the company for at least five years, and many have worked there for more than 10 years. Employees leave Starworks to move into other part-time employment, retirement, or non-work programs.

When employees choose to end their employment, DDA staff work with them to find alternative activities.

### **Other Employment Supports**

The production supervisors, manager and other non-target staff implement other employment supports on an ongoing basis. One supervisor has 30 years experience working with and training persons with developmental disabilities, while the manager has 25 years of experience in warehouse operations, logistics management and staff supervision.

Supervisors will often provide informal supports that are not part of any formal policy. On occasion, for example, they will purchase bus tickets, coordinate with HandyDART <sup>1</sup>, or distribute donated clothing or leftover food from functions to more needy employees.

As a division of DDA, Starworks is able to draw from the agency's expertise to help staff develop pre-employment skills, provide access to interpreters for hard of hearing workers, and work with the supervisory staff to improve their competence in communication. The supports that DDA offers provide more stability for employees and thereby improve their employment stability. DDA has supported housing as well as a Drop In Centre for other services.

### **Community Supports**

Starworks relies heavily on DDA and other community agencies to support its employees dealing with non work-related issues such as housing, life skills, etc. In earlier years, Starworks tried to provide these services in-house, but this created role confusion for both employees and staff, so now they link the employee to expertise elsewhere in the organization or to other community agencies. Doing so has the added benefit of creating a clear distinction for the employees between work and the rest of their lives, encouraging them to put their outside world aside for a few hours and focus just on work.

DDA has relationships with several other community agencies serving people with developmental disabilities, all of which are regularly accessed by Starworks employees. These include, among others, Coast Foundation, community health centres, PLAN, QUEST, Vancouver Food Bank, Community Living BC and BC Housing. They may also provide employees with referrals to other community supports as needed.

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<sup>1</sup> HandyDART is door-to-door shared-ride service public transit service in Metro Vancouver that uses specially equipped vehicles designed to carry passengers with physical or cognitive disabilities.

Starworks has also greatly benefited from community groups such as BC Social Venture Partners, which provided volunteer advisors to assist with strategic planning and sales growth during the enterprise's mid-growth years.

### Challenges

One of Starworks' biggest challenges has been to secure long-term contracts. Starworks' employees require a fair amount of time and training to learn how to execute each new order, so the company has more success in fulfilling longer-term contracts, which are generally easier to fulfill and aren't as time-sensitive.

Related to this, the level of demand for Starworks' services fluctuates, which in turn can either benefit or challenge their employment mandate.

Starworks also grapples with the implications of social assistance regulations related to earnings exemption for people with disabilities. Starworks and DDA would like to see a scenario where disincentives to work are removed, and people can graduate into more hours and higher earning potential.

### Cost of Employment Support

Starworks' expenses are primarily related to the running of the business, not stand-alone employment supports. Hiring, training, supervision costs may be higher than comparable mainstream business, and vary depending on the specific employee mix and contracts in production. Any internal costs related to achieving its employment mandate are not tracked separately.

Rather than carrying employment support expenses on its books, Starworks relies on DDA, along with other agencies serving people with developmental disabilities, to provide those services and cover those expenses. DDA also provides some "corporate" in-kind costs for services they provide to Starworks, such as accounting, payroll and communications activities.

Starworks encourages employees to remain on government benefits for medical and extended health, effectively saving this cost. Government benefits are also desirable for those with mental health medications that can be very expensive or not covered by private insurance.

Starworks has intentionally not sought government funding, since doing so may place limitations on their operations in areas such as hiring criteria and prescribed employment outcomes.

An indirect employee support cost is the facility location. Starworks is based in Vancouver, amidst a relatively expensive real estate market, allowing the organization to assist employees in accessing work on public transit. The choice of location means the enterprise's facility cost per square foot is higher than that of competitors located in neighbouring, less expensive areas.

## **Employment Outcomes**

### ***Benefits to Employees***

Starworks provides a positive alternative to the long-term unemployment experienced by many people with disabilities. Most employees arrive at Starworks with positive attitudes, and leave with general employment and workplace safety skills, packaging and assembly skills, and above all, confidence.

Starworks has found that the packaging and assembly business is a good fit with their target employees, most of whom have low literacy levels and would not succeed in highly technical roles or have previously been unsuccessful in competitive employment. By meeting speed and quality control targets, employees are able to achieve a sense of expertise and success, and feel pride in their work.

Employees also experience a sense of pride and accomplishment for being able to hold a secure and stable long-term job. Earning an income, while also learning basic money skills around saving and spending, offers employees a feeling of economic inclusion in society. "Now they can go to Starbucks like so many typical peers, or save for a small vacation– they are very happy about this," says Deanne Ziebart, DDA's Director of Vocational & Community Services.

Finally, employees experience an increased sense of community as a result of working at Starworks, building new relationships and friends even without any formal programs to promote this. For example, a small group meet before work for coffee and 16 staff members have learned a bit of sign language so that they can better communicate with staff who are deaf.. Several staff members have become friends outside of work and share common interests.

### ***Benefits to The Enterprise***

Starworks' model of employment also provides cost benefits to the enterprise. One of the clearest benefits comes from high retention and a low turnover rate. The company's onboarding process is more staff intensive than that of their mainstream competitors who hire entry-level workers, but their lower turnover rates offset those costs. Staff loyalty is a strong competitive advantage.



Starworks also benefits by having DDA cover some administrative and employment support costs, and by having relationships with other community agencies that provide life supports.

### **Key Takeaways**

Starworks' success in hiring and retaining people with multiple barriers to employment can be attributed to two primary factors.

First, Starworks has adapted its operations to meet the needs and skill levels of its target employees.

- They focus on the individual's needs as far as scheduling is concerned, offering part-time work hours. Work absences are accommodated and extended leaves of absence are acceptable.
- Their recruitment and hiring process is inclusionary, offering innovative "working interviews" that combine orientation, training and practice prior to skilled time trials.
- They rely heavily on visual aids for training and ongoing instruction, addressing low literacy and other employee challenges through their functional systems.
- They break down tasks into manageable pieces to meet the abilities of their staff.

Starworks' second primary success factor is its relationship with its parent organization. DDA's support and backing has been instrumental along the entire lifespan of Starworks. Starworks' supervisory staff members are all DDA employees; their history of working with people with developmental disabilities has been instrumental. Additionally, the parent agency's financial support has helped make the enterprise flexible, self-sufficient and sustainable, without having to rely on government funding.