

## **TRANSCRIPT: More Talent Untapped**

### **EPISODE 3 - Sharon Singh**

AK: This program is brought to you by RBC. In order to speak up for inclusion, we need to speak about inclusion.

AK: I'm Anna-Karina Tabuñar and this is More Talent Untapped. Conversations about unconventional, sometimes underestimated talent... and the differences that connect us.

Sharon: People are able to share how they feel. And that is now going to help drive how we engage our employees. It's making us look at our procedures and criteria of how we select individuals for roles, really double check on why are we selecting individuals for certain opportunities. Why maybe we have missed individuals for certain opportunities. So it's making us question a lot of these policies and procedures we have in place.

AK: Sharon Singh has been integrating diverse voices into the workforce for years. She proactively seeks out and develops talent with disabilities. As a human resources professional, she's well aware of the hesitations, myths and misunderstandings. She also knows the long-term value of hiring a person with a disability. She recruited Ahmed Abukar — the accountant from episode 2. His extraordinary attitude and outlook will inspire you! If you haven't already, take the time to listen to the episode featuring Ahmed.

Now back to Sharon.... She discovered Ahmed at a career fair for people with disabilities. That was pre-COVID of course. Five years ago, in fact.

Sharon: Five years ago? Was it five years ago?

AK: I understand that it was, about yeah, four and half, close to five years ago. Can I take you back to the job fair where you first met Ahmed Abukar? Okay? So you're back at this job fair and you see this young man with his white cane. What was it that stood out about him?

Sharon: Well, what I really liked about Ahmed is that he showed confidence. He was walking up to people as well. He was shaking their hands. He was not afraid to approach individuals and talk about himself. He was also very transparent about what he wanted. He knew he wanted to be

in accounting. He was going for his CPA. And he was able to articulate that. He was very clear on what he wanted. And so I was very impressed with that. The fact is, he did not make his disability, to me, he didn't talk about his disability. He was talking about what he's done in his education, what experience he has tried to develop over the years. I so thought that was great. He was very clear on what he wanted.

AK: In Ahmed's case, you can't really hide that kind of disability. He had his white cane and he obviously has a vision impairment. He was telling me that a lot of managers at the time couldn't see past the white cane. But you did.

Sharon: I did because I, honestly, was looking for talent. Right? I supported finance at that time. And I really wanted to hire people who were working towards having their CPA. Having that education, having that drive, who really was able to learn. Demonstrating RBC vision and values and our leadership behaviours. And he was able to demonstrate that. And so I thought, you know, here is a candidate. Yes, he has a disability, but he has everything we're looking for to fit the role.

AK: So why show up at a career fair that was specifically tailored for talent with disabilities? What is it about that market that draws you?

Sharon: The reason why I think it draws me is because I am fully aware that it's an underrepresented community, and I also know that there's a lot of great talent within that community. And for some reason they're not always applying online. And what I realized during my research is people were getting frustrated. Tired of being rejected, not getting even past maybe the application process. So it was also for us to get out there, build our brand as an inclusive company who wanted to support this community, and so that's why we chose to really get into these career fairs. It was just another avenue to reach out to talent.

AK: Now let me ask you, let's go back to Ahmed. So you hire him on as an intern. What were some of the hesitations among his new team, and his new co-workers and managers?

Sharon: When I presented Ahmed to the hiring managers, they saw the same things that I did. Here's a qualified young individual who has the drive, who has the hunger to learn, and wants to be here. The hesitation

was, hey how do we accommodate individuals? And it was really about educating ourselves on how, as a company we can accommodate this individual and how can we leverage technology or learn new ways? And so we had to take a moment, engage the right people, engage our accommodations team. And even for them, they were thinking how can we do this with these systems that we have? We took the time to actually research it, and so that's how we all approached it. We knew this was going to take a long time because none of us were the experts on actually how to accommodate this person. But we knew he was the right person.

AK: So how long did that process take and how much did it cost?

Sharon: The process took a long time. I would say, if I can remember, I think it was a good six months. We had again people with visual impairments working at RBC. But again, it's accommodating the person in this space and the systems that they have to use. So a lot of that was analysis. So it did take about six months. Maybe a bit more. To be honest with you, I don't remember the cost. But the cost, I could imagine it was between 10 and 20 thousand dollars because we wanted not only to accommodate him for this role, but also the potential to work from home if he needed to. So really looking into different avenues and setting him up for success.

AK: So do you think having made that investment in systems has made you more attractive as an employer?

Sharon: I do because I do feel like we're not only attractive as an employer to the external community, but internally. You know, bringing awareness and education to others about what RBC is doing because also we have an employee base that has children with disabilities, and they see what RBC is doing for individuals to have them work at RBC and share their knowledge and skills. It's created that buddy system on the team. I also think it's educated them to be more sensitive and empathetic to look at individuals differently. A lot of them said they learn so much by hearing Ahmed's story, hearing how positive he is, breaking their stereotypes about individuals with disabilities. And knowing that, you know what, they don't look at it as a disability. Ahmed is like, this is part of me and here's how we can work around it. And they feel grateful that he's so open to having that conversation. Because they're very curious. They want to be inclusive. But they just don't know how. But what Ahmed has created, is an area where

he's telling them, "Ask me the questions and I'll tell you. And even if I don't know, let's figure it out together." So I really felt like it has brought the team together based on the feedback that I've received.

AK: You mentioned that the accommodation process took about six months. What were some of the ups and downs during that period, because an outsider might go, that's so much lost productivity, so much frustration. I'm out of here.

Sharon: It's about having the right candidate, not about how long is it going to take. Yes, maybe it could be seen as a loss of productivity. But if you think about it, how have you been working so far? And if as a team, not only your manager, but if as a group they know we've hired the right person, it may take them a little bit longer, but they're coming. It is more motivation for the team to rally together, and get the work done until that person's in place.

AK: On a practical level, on a day-to-day level as you're sorting out getting the right systems in place, how do you keep that new talent on board and productive and engaged?

Sharon: What we did for Ahmed, because I wanted to make sure he doesn't leave or go to another company, I'm sure he's getting offers, is that the manager connected with him, gave him materials that we could share with him, that he could start reading. We also said that he could meet some of his team members before he started to keep him engaged. To be honest with you he said to me, he kept saying, "I'm not going anywhere." And I go, "I hope you don't." But it didn't mean we had to work slower — I made us, like, we made the right decision. We have a loyal employee who wants to stay with us. So win-win situation for all of us.

AK: And you can't put a dollar figure on that.

Sharon: No, you can't, you can't.

Sharon: Anna-Karina did you, how did you feel since you've done Talent Untapped? That's what I want to know. How has it changed you?

AK: It took me a long time to own disability, for me. It took me a long time to be able to self-identify because of my own baggage and my own thinking

that disability means I'm a liability because my body's failing me. And Ahmed was one of the people who really turned my thinking around. When I heard him speak with so much confidence and owning — just owning — this is part of me. That shifted for me. And then over the years to this point that we're at now, where we're hearing all these stories. And knowing the difference they make, it's emboldened me to be more open to share my own. Because I know there are people out there who are still feeling they've got this non-visible disability, that they don't really want to share because maybe they see it as a weakness, or a liability. Layered on top of the fact that maybe they were brought up in a culture where they don't speak up for themselves because it's just not right. It goes against your cultural beliefs and the way you were brought up. Since I did the film, it's brought me so much closer and it's really heightened my awareness. As an employer, I proactively seek talent with disabilities. So if I have a project or if I have an opening, I go to my connections in the disability space because I know what it brings to the table. And I see from a lot of other employers that once they can get disability right within their workforce, it's so much easier to get all the other facets of diversity because disability is so intersectional.

Sharon: So you make such an interesting point, because it is true. Once you get one of these under-represented groups right, it will benefit everyone. And that's how I also feel about the Black Lives Movement with George Floyd. Because I do agree with that. I think that has made us think differently. It has paused and changed the way we listen to employees. I think a lot of companies are now moving toward what we call active listening. And people are able to share how they feel, and that is now going to help drive how we engage our employees. It's making us look at our procedures and criteria of how we select individuals for roles. Really double check on why are we selecting individuals for certain opportunities. Why maybe we have missed individuals for certain opportunities. So it's making us question a lot of these policies and procedures we have in place. And how to integrate the employee voice in everything that we do. And I think it's such a good thing. And I think that this will benefit all under-represented communities, so persons with disabilities, people from the Black community, Aboriginal as well. We really have an opportunity here to do things better.

Sharon: I have to say, I think with the pandemic, I think it will open up a lot more doors because since we are all working from home, the majority of

the workforce is working from home. That was considered accommodation before. For you to work from home majority of the time was seen as accommodation.

AK: Or a perk.

Sharon: Or a perk, right, exactly. But now as we move forward, we are actually being asked by RBC, "Do you prefer to work from home? Is this actually working for you?" And the reason why they're asking that is they realize having 65,000 plus employees working from home and be this productive is great. And you can have a productive workforce, and it doesn't always have to be in the office. You can work virtually. And now I'm thinking that before what we see as an accommodation is now, hopefully going to be a norm. It's still in discussion. It's opened up a whole new door for persons with disability who may not be able to go to work for some reason, or travel or move from locations.

AK: So you think that because we're now able and almost mandated to work from home, employers are more open to hiring more people with disabilities?

Sharon: I think they don't view it as an accommodation any more. I don't even, I mean, the view was how you got your work done is you should be in the office. That was a myth. And this whole COVID busted that myth. So I think it just opens more doors on how you look at how a job could be done.

AK: Apart from the ability to work from home, what other policies and procedures do you see shifting in this COVID era and this work-from-home age?

Sharon: I think one of the things is around recruitment and hiring. Do we really need to relocate people now? No, we probably don't. We can actually have people work in the countries that they're living in. Now there's a whole bunch of compliance and risk issues. I'm going to put it out there. But there are things that we are definitely going to consider. And it's another way of potentially bringing in different types of talent. If we are able to have people work in locations that they're most comfortable with and works with their lifestyle, then, yeah, we've just opened up a brand-new talent pool.

Sharon: If you're not doing it already, you should be sponsoring. You know, sponsor someone. Help them get connected. That's what people are looking for, right. Half the time, we know when we apply to a role, it's having that sponsor there behind you that helps your brand and potentially could push you forward. Sponsorship is extremely important, and I hope a lot of people out there take the time to do that, especially looking at individuals within the under-represented communities because that's what they need right now.

AK: I couldn't agree with you more, Sharon. And the whole notion of becoming a sponsor, it doesn't have to cost anything. There doesn't need to be any formal structure in place. It's introducing that talent into your network in a very proactive and intentional way.

Sharon: You know, I think it's a partnership. To find a sponsor, you have to find someone that wants to be your sponsor as well. And a lot of times people will automatically go to the top of the house. They want the CEO to be their sponsor which I always think is great. But you know, don't forget about your peers. Don't forget those that are at least one level higher than you. Those are sometimes the better sponsors to have because they're around. They understand what is happening around them, what's happening in the environment. They can give you a perspective. Where sometimes if you get someone who's so far away from where you are, yeah, they may not be able to give you that type of insight to help you develop. So your sponsors can be at many levels. And I think that's important. To have a sponsor, they actually have to know you. I've known Ahmed for five years. I've tracked his career. I've connected with his managers. His managers connected with me when they needed advice. So I can honestly say I know Ahmed. I know his skills and capabilities. And I'm confident as a sponsor. I can talk about him and I know what work he can put out. So, yes.

AK: So you're his PR person.

Sharon: Yes, I'm part of his branding team. Sometimes you think it's harder to connect with other people, but it's not. It's actually not. You just need to make the decision to get out in the community and be surrounded by those individuals. And you'll know very quickly that there are a lot of people that are looking for that support.

AK: I know all about that need for support because when I was a young immigrant trying to break into the workforce, I didn't have the guidance of a sponsor or mentor. I had no network. I didn't know the rules of engagement. It was a struggle just to fit in. But it doesn't need to be that way for others. I encourage you to check out Sharon's favourite organizations in the show notes, and consider becoming a sponsor, especially to someone in an under-represented group.

More Talent Untapped is a sequel to the documentary Talent Untapped. If you're interested in a special screening of the original film, send me a note through my website [annakarinatabunar.com](http://annakarinatabunar.com).

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The people who helped put together this show are: Lindsey Vodarek, Howard Sonnenberg, Ashley Wright, Colin Van Hattem and me, Anna-Karina Tabuñar.

I'm back in two weeks with another episode of More Talent Untapped.

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