September is Disability Employment Month in B.C. It’s a time to celebrate people with disabilities who contribute to our communities, small businesses, corporations and communities. It’s also an opportunity to talk about the proven benefits of inclusive workplaces—for individuals, for companies, and for British Columbia.

B.C. is rich in talent and opportunity, yet we face labour shortages spanning industries and regions. By 2025, B.C. employers will need to fill an estimated one-million jobs. With competition for talent so tight, it makes sense to create hiring practices that include the best people. Hiring people with diverse abilities is not only the right thing to do—it’s a smart business decision.

People with disabilities are educated and ready to work. Of Canadians between the ages of 25 and 64, a higher percentage of people with disabilities have post-secondary certificates than those without a disability. And, we’re not talking about a small group of people. Over 330,000 working-age British Columbians identify as having a disability, be it physical, mental, visible or invisible. That’s an incredible, largely untapped talent pool.

If you are an employer, diverse hiring practices can help you be more competitive. People with disabilities will bring different perspectives to the workplace, helping spur innovation. Seeing an established industry from a new angle is invaluable in this era of disruption. Research shows that inclusive workplaces are twice as likely to meet or exceed financial targets, and six times more likely to effectively anticipate change and apply innovative solutions.

As community leaders and employers, building inclusive workplaces has been a competitive advantage for government, opening the door to some of our best and brightest talent. With 1 in 7 Canadians having a disability, more people can see themselves in the organizations they do business with, improving morale throughout organizations.

Our collective goal is to be the most inclusive province in Canada. We want to create a barrier-free environment for our customers, employees and people. Fifty-seven percent of Canadians with physical disabilities who are currently unemployed believe they would be able to work if workplaces were made more accessible. Each of our organizations, be it in the public or private sector, works hard to create a comfortable environment for people—having an inclusive workplace helps foster that welcoming culture.
It’s a culture that’s spreading. The federal government recently announced accessibility legislation and the province will look at legislation for B.C. in the coming months. And, in October, we will host a gathering with B.C. business leaders who recognize inclusivity as a competitive advantage to talk about how to recruit, hire and retain talented people who happen to have disabilities.

The biggest misconception about hiring people with disabilities is that it will be a burden, and that’s simply not true. Many employers still have an unconscious bias. They tell us they think it’s going to be hard. It's not. There are supports available through programs such as Tech@Work that provide adaptive technology, and the Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification program for employers who want to understand the accessibility of their workplace. The Presidents Group offers free resources and tools to fellow employers through our website – www.accessibleemployers.ca; and the B.C. government supports employment for people with disabilities through programs like the Employment Program of B.C.

Our various workplaces are, without a doubt, better off because of the diverse people in them. Hiring people with disabilities can help strengthen people’s lives, businesses, and the province. We hope that employers will join us by building diversity into their hiring practices to help build a better, more accessible B.C.

_Shane Simpson is the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. Tamara Vrooman and Craig Richmond are co-chairs of the Presidents Group, a network of change-driven BC business leaders who are champions for more accessible, inclusive workplaces._