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So I'm thrilled to welcome Erica Shea, who is the executive director of New Dawn. And Erica, I'd love for you to introduce yourself and share a little bit about what New Dawn is, what's your kind of purpose and your connection to the community. Great. Well, thank you for having me. It's really lovely to be here for the conversation. My name is Erica. uh

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have the immense privilege of being part of an organization in Cape Breton called New Don Enterprises. um New Don predominantly works in the Cape Breton regional municipality, which is one of five municipalities and five First Nations that make up our 10 island jurisdictions.

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New Dawn has been around since 1976. So next year, the organization will turn 50 years old, which is a big milestone for all of us. And like so many organizations, New Dawn started in 1976 with a great idea, a lot of heart, a commitment to making the community a more self-reliant and vibrant place. And then

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Today, we're made up of 15 nonprofits and two charities. We have over 200 staff and we continue to go to the places where the community is saying it needs us. And so as the community changes, we change. And so today we work in

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housing, particularly doing a lot of work around supportive housing for youth and adults. Food security through our Meals on Meals program. We send out about 40,000 meals a year to community members. We do immigration settlement, which has been a really exciting journey since 2016. We operate the Eldalic Arts Centre. We are building a new

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25,000 square foot youth center in the community of Glaze Bay. The walls just went up last week. We operate the largest home care company on the island. uh Commercial real estate, residential real estate, uh all kind of knit together by that same desire to help the community become more vibrant, uh more healthy, and more self-reliant.

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Yeah, that's so incredible. Just the breadth of the kinds of services and programs and just from what I know about New Dawn that you do, community is at the center of everything you do. And so as you just talked about, know, changing over time to adapt to community needs. So today in this podcast, we're really focused on accessible recruiting and hiring.

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And one of the reasons we knew we wanted to talk to you and to hear more about the New Dawn experience is, well, because you are an employer and employing over 200 people on the island of Cape Breton, you are a large employer in Cape Breton. um But also knowing that you're trying to create really inclusive, accessible um people, uh processes and policies in the work that you do because you're trying to reflect

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the community um that is on the island. So I guess what does that really look like or what does that mean to you and to New Dawn? Sort of accessible and inclusive recruiting and hiring. At a very high level, it means just because we've always done something one way doesn't mean that it is based in evidence or that it's the right

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and only way to do something. And so over the last couple of years, as we've looked at our recruitment, hiring, and onboarding processes, we've made a number of changes that sometimes to some people seem quite...

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disruptive or odd uh and have been able to test out those hypotheses to determine that they do contribute to the kind of work culture that we want to have here at New Dawn. So I would say at a very high level, it is to realize that systems and practices and processes

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are human made and they can be human unmade as well. Yeah. So love that sort of big picture view. Can you give us an example of maybe a process or something like within that kind of recruitment and hiring that has changed? Yeah. So I'll start by saying, oh maybe highlighting a couple of things around job postings that we have

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change. So uh one, we are more intentional about distributing job postings to organizations that serve individuals who have barriers to employment. now, rather than just posting on the Government of Canada job board or the Cape Breton Partnership job board, we have a list of organizations like

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Autism Nova Scotia, the Jennifer Keeping Center at CBU, the Mi'kmaq Economic Benefits Office, that we just take 30 seconds and we send every job posting to as we're putting it up in those traditional job search locations. Yeah, that's so key, right? So building those community partnerships and then that follow through where you're sharing job postings.

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simple and effective yet often overlooked. Absolutely. And through that process to your point about building relationships, we now have a relationship with Autism Nova Scotia and we now have a relationship with MEBO or the Mi'kmaq Economic Benefits Office. And those relationships lead to other conversations about

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internships and co-op placements and job fairs and that is generative over time for both organizations. absolutely. yeah, there other other, so I love that you're focusing in on job postings, right? Are there other things that

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have shifted for you in that realm, whether it's job postings, job listings, descriptions, that sort of thing. Yeah, so two other things I'll say in relation to the job postings. One, we always post the compensation uh in all of our postings. So we post the salary, we post the specifics of the benefits package, which can be

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really important to folks who come to work here. And we transitioned a couple of years ago to a 32-hour work week. so part of that transition has been to empower staff to define when they work those 32 hours. And so instead of saying, you know, we're closed Mondays or we're closed Fridays, every staff member works with their team to decide

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Do they want to take a day off every week? Do they want to work short days? Do they or a family member have recurring medical or mental health appointments that they want to build their schedule around? when we made that transition from 40 hours a week down to 32, it was for the same compensation that everyone was earning at 40 hours a week.

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to recognize that humans are complex and they live full and complex lives. And none of our lives are really consistently amenable to nine to five, Monday to Friday, because we're also community members and we're also parents and we're also children of aging parents. So we put all of that in the job posting as well as our flexibility around where folks work. So we really

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um encourage everyone to think about where they do their best work. And that's going to kind of change throughout the week and throughout the month, depending on whether it's a day full of meetings or a day full of deep thinking. But we want to highlight these things in the job postings upfront, um knowing that they will help us to attract a broader spectrum of candidates who both share our values and

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need or simply appreciate this different way of thinking about work and when we work and where we work. Yeah, that's so incredible. And I know, I think that you were part of a larger pilot project right around the four-day work week with other nonprofits across the province. Yeah. And the research points to the incredible benefits.

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not only of attracting talent, but retaining that talent as well. And I know as a result of that, um that research, I guess, and hearing about those experiences, that's the direction that we at SeaChange are moving into. So anyone working full-time would work, yeah, the 32 hours instead of the 40. um So I really love, you know, and I hope other organizations are learning from that as well. um

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What have you have? Have you found a difference in just and I know it might be hard to sort of pinpoint kind of one change. um And so maybe actually what I'll ask is, is have you made other changes along the hiring kind of journey? So things like interviews, things like how people submit applications, I don't know. um Have, have there been some changes there and I'd love to hear about them. Yeah, so the

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The biggest change that we've made in our interviewing process, well, three changes. So first, anyone who's interviewing for a position has the option of doing their interview virtually or in person. um It's not a function of their being in another province. It's really about helping people.

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become as comfortable as they can be during the interview process to have a really interesting conversation with us. So one, offering that up. Two, all of our interviews are now conducted in the Elboy Art Center, which is a Rick Hansen certified building with respect to its physical accessibility. And then three,

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We provide all of the interview questions up front now. So we send all of the interview questions a week in advance to give candidates the time to reflect on them, to prepare notes. We encourage candidates if they want to bring notes or bring a laptop or bring other memory devices, things that are going to help them say in the interview,

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what they most want to say to us. And so it's not a pop quiz and we're not trying to trick anyone or catch anyone off guard. We're trying to find people who really fit into the values and the work of the organization. so taken all together, those have made our interview

experience

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more accessible and we hope.

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regardless of whether someone is the successful candidate or not, a really enjoyable, warm experience. Yeah, and maybe one that's a lot less stressful than the traditional questions kind of in the moment, for example. So one of the questions, so these are all such great examples of kind of breaking down that recruitment and hiring process from what's in the job postings, where are you sharing them? uh

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How far in advance do people get questions? Where can they do their interview? What does the space look like? Are there circumstances, because this all sounds really amazing, and then are there circumstances? I mean, you talk about home care, you talk about meals on wheels. There must be jobs that people can't do virtually or can't do in maybe the most flexible way. So I assume that there are some positions that

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don't have uh that same level of flexibility. Yeah, there are some positions like home care, example. We employ nurses and CCAs in our home care company. And there's a spectrum of work that CCAs and personal care assistants and nurses can do in homes and facilities.

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Some of our home care staff are lifting and moving patients from bed to wheelchair, from wheelchair to shower and back. And so where we have positions that do have um some very specific physical requirements, we'll include all of that in the

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job posting, but also including things like requires long periods of sitting. um it's a more of an administrative job requires long periods of sitting at a computer in an effort to be as transparent as we can and helping people find the work that they are looking for and feel like they're best suited for.

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Yeah, that's, yeah, that's, mean, and that, and that just is a reflection of the different types of positions and jobs that you, you offer, right, or that you have. So are there other factors in the interview process, in terms of even, I guess, beyond the interview selection, for example, like how are you then identifying who is the best candidate? What are some of the tools you use for that?

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So we.

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conduct interviews in such a way that we will have, you know, always have at least two on our interview panel. We try not to go more than three because that can become overwhelming to be sitting in front of uh a jury of six. So we'll have two or three staff managers conducting the interview. They all have, um,

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an interview template that's got the questions laid out that they'll be taking turns asking. They record the responses from the candidates and then they score each answer and score the interview overall. And they're really looking for answers that

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point to some thought having been given to the question. um It's about um a depth and connecting the answer to the way that New Dawn works in the community. Right. you likely... Yeah, that is, you know, really leaning towards ah

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corporate speak or a really corporate, highly structured, intense pressure-filled environment may suggest that that person might not thrive here at New Dawn. Yeah. Yeah. And so then once the interviews are complete, the scoring is tallied up and the interview panel has a conversation about the set of interviews that have been conducted.

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whether there are candidates, um often if we have two or three candidates who are really all excellent, we'll think about doing a second round of interviews. um So it is both.

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both structured.

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and quantitative, but there's also an element of getting to know the people who are sitting across the table from us and wanting to assess whether they would thrive here and this would be work.

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that they would really enjoy and it would be meaningful to them. Yeah. And in a way, sort of what I'm hearing too is that you almost want to see some of those values, those New Dawn values kind of shared back and that there's values alignment, right? In the kind of work that you do, you're community-centered and um if someone is aligned with those or not and that coming out kind of through your

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your interview process. Yeah, that's great. then so as we kind of move along that continuum or that journey, you talked already about um onboarding. so again, I'd love to just hear what are some of the things, some of the approaches you're taking to make onboarding more accessible and inclusive.

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Yeah. Onboarding um gives us the opportunity to ask new employees what they need to succeed at the job that they're about to take on. what does their optimal office setup look like? What kind of desk and chair and computer equipment um

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Do they need to do their work? Do they need a setup at home in addition to a setup at the office? And so then we work with them to procure the furnishings and equipment that are best suited to their needs and their bodies and their ways and places of working. And we ah have opened

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uh low stakes, continuous conversations in the organization about neurodivergence and the different ways that that shows up in the work and what individuals want and need to support their achieving their outcomes with um from a place of neurodivergence. And so

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Some employees feel comfortable identifying those needs when we're first asking them about office and computer setup. may mention at that juncture. Now they're still new, so they also may be a little bit hesitant, but they may mention at that juncture. You know, I really find it's important that when I'm doing my funding applications or my strategic

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or my deep work, I can't be interrupted. And so I need a do not disturb sign that I can put on my door um that will send a clear signal to my colleagues that um I need good separation between social time and work time and I can't have the two intermingle. But it's not a conversation that stops at hiring. It's something that we encourage people to do continuously.

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Our work throughout the year at the administrative level, so we have with all of our different entities, a management team of about 25 individuals. And so their work will have oh peaks of intensity and valleys throughout the year, depending on um their particular business model.

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And so it's just an ongoing question and conversation. What do you

need this week to do the work that lies ahead of you and encouraging people explicitly again and again and again and again, like take what you need. We have a couple of folks a few times a year who need to lock themselves in a hotel room for three days. And that, you know, it's about.

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kind of like, you know, self-awareness, self-reflection, what do you need this week to do the work that you need to do? um And that can inform when you work, where you work, how you work. And so that's kind of that ongoing sort of low stakes conversation that we're always having with one another and um trying to lead by example um that we're not

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No one is preoccupied with where your body is in space. um It's about um being well and achieving our outcomes together. Yeah. Love that focus, especially as both provincial and federal mandates change around, know, must go back to work X number of days a week because that equals productivity. And we know that it doesn't.

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and that it can be very harmful um and there's a big impact. Because of all the things you said before, we are whole beings with lives beyond work and for many reasons, whether that be chronic pain or being neurodivergent or having young children or elderly parents as you talked about. um

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I appreciate just these examples and especially the one you just talked about around sort of the low stakes conversation because we know that in Nova Scotia we have the highest rates of disability of any province um across the country. So at almost 40%. And so 40 % of our, employees, my employees, all employees are really might be having some of those accessibility needs.

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But that disclosure conversation can be challenging. And people feel like there might be stigma or they may be given a less meaningful role or fewer opportunities to advance, for example, um or passed over even um at an interview level or stage. So I really appreciate you bringing in that it's a continuous conversation and that it doesn't have to be, okay, here's the meeting.

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where you disclose or you don't. then we, you um I think about just, um I've shared this in other episodes, but I'm a late diagnosis ADHDer. And so it was only diagnosed in my late forties. And um so what I needed at work really changed once I understood more about, this is why I've been having these kinds of, you know, um maybe

barriers uh at work.

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or in other places and here's what I now know I need. We've also talked to some employers who say, oh, people have been diagnosed or, and maybe it's new and they don't even know what they need in that early stage. And so they're learning as they go along. ah just that idea of like that really ongoing process of the low stakes conversation I think is really key.

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And so do you have particular training that you do with managers to ensure that they have the skill base to be able to offer kind of that, um you know, those low stakes approaches and more accessible um ways of working? Yeah, we don't. We haven't formalized it in that way. A lot flows

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grew our very small but very mighty human resources team. And I use the team word liberally because it's an individual. it's a big job, but he is exceptionally committed to workplaces and processes that are inclusive of individuals with

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disabilities. so em he's involved in all of the, every time a job gets posted, every time an interview is scheduled, he's often the second person sitting in on interviews. And so he brings a lot of that em knowledge and way of approaching these things to the managers. And in his presence in these different junctures along the hiring and onboarding process, he also does. em

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the sort of broad orientation and helping folks get set up with their offices once they're hired.

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I think that...

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Over the last couple of years, it has been, so when I say, I guess, leading by example, um I have a team who report to me, there's four uh team members. And so I am checking in with them all the time about, you know, how's your heart? How's your workload? How's home? And

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What do you need right now? And through those conversations, there are folks who have disclosed for the first time, felt comfortable to disclose for the first time that they have a diagnosis or uh a disability. And then we can work together to make sure they have what they need. In turn,

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They carry that to the managers who report to them and the managers carry that to the staff that they employ. So it is training. It's just practical, um you know, maybe micro learning. Yeah. And I think what happens, it's been interesting to see it happen in real time and not something that I would have anticipated, but

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people who you wouldn't expect.

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Harry, lot of shame. um and so when you can have a conversation and, it's like, can, you can see the shame evaporating and. We're having a conversation about disability. We're having a conversation about, you know, maybe it's one of their children who have a disability or a new diagnosis. Maybe they have a later career diagnosis. And once.

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you have the first conversation, the second, third, fourth, and fifth conversations. It's about making it a subject that is okay and safe to talk about. um I think that's been a surprising side effect of the way we've been approaching this is seeing the shame evaporate and watching the topic become one.

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that can be discussed over the water cooler and not just in, like you were saying earlier, okay, this is the meeting where you talk about what the, uh it just, becomes part of, em people are able to embrace all parts of their identity and body and needs um in conversations with their peers, not just in conversations with.

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maybe their managers or their supervisors. Yeah, that's so, important. And I uh really appreciate the checking questions, right? The heart, the home, and then kind of the work, and really seeing ah people as holistic in all of those ways. So if you could give advice to other employers. uh

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what advice would you give as like, whether it's places to start or like, you know, areas to focus around accessible recruitment and hiring? Sort of looping back to the very beginning of the conversation, I think my biggest piece of advice would be, you know, there are no rules and we inherit ways of doing things and ways of thinking and um

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Once you can make those ways of doing things and ways of thinking visible, you can interrogate them. And it can be a lot of fun and it

can lead to really good generative places. think for us, um I think really the interview is the first opportunity that you have to convey

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the culture of who you are. And so really, for us, that means making the interview itself a place of servant leadership, where we're organizing to enable the person who's coming in for an interview to do their very best work so that they leave the interview feeling great no matter what.

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happens next. And so I would say if I could offer one place to start, that would be it. That the interview is the first signal to a prospective new employee about what is the culture of this place. And you can convey that by making such simple little tweaks.

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to the process, you know, would you like us to wear masks during your interview if it's in person? um Having everyone who are on the interview panel disclose their, share their pronouns at the start of the interview, really laying out in an email in advance, here's how the interview um is going to unfold. All of those small gestures.

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create a space that feels warmer and safer for people to be themselves and share with you who they really are. Because that's the purpose of having an interview in the first place is to find out who people are and find the people who are meant to be with you.

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Yeah, thank you so much, Erica. It's been a delightful conversation and really appreciate the way you've shared some very specific approaches, some very specific ways that um through the whole journey of recruitment and hiring and onboarding, that New Dawn is really uh creating and not just doing what you've kind of done always, right? And so really,

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shifting that and seeing what could be done differently to really create safer, more inclusive spaces for everyone. And I hope that organizations and people within organizations are listening to this and thinking, yeah, what's one thing that I could shift in my process? Because it just needs a place to start and then the curiosity to keep learning.

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So I want to thank you so much for bringing your perspective and sharing the heart-centered, community-centered way that New Dawn is creating change in Unamagi and Cape Breton and beyond. Thank you so much. This has been so lovely. Thank you. Great.

