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Opportunity for All

Improving Workplace Experiences and Career Outcomes for
Canadians With Disabilities



The Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences futures (FSC-CCF) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.

The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada.

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Funded by the
Government of Canada's
Future Skills Program



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Key findings

- People with disabilities (PwD) are over-represented in low-paying jobs that are at high risk of automation, including jobs as retail salespeople, cashiers, light duty cleaners, and transport truck drivers.
- Key barriers that limit career advancement for PwD include ableism in the workplace, difficulty securing required accommodations, risk of losing government assistance and/or employer benefits, and lower self-confidence and motivation caused by repeated negative experiences in the workplace.
- Canadian employers can improve career opportunities for PwD by providing more disability awareness training in the workplace, implementing accessible recruitment and onboarding strategies, and providing necessary accommodations from the start of recruitment and onboarding.
- Governments can offer employer incentives, raise asset cut-offs to receiving disability support, and provide more funding and programming to increase access to upskilling and career advancement opportunities for PwD.



Introduction

People with disabilities (PwD) often face barriers to employment and career progression.¹ Only 59 per cent of Canadians with disabilities reported being employed in 2017, compared with 80 per cent of Canadians without disabilities.²

Even when employed, PwD are over-represented in low-paying jobs that are at high risk of automation, including jobs as retail salespeople, cashiers, light duty cleaners, and transport truck drivers.³

The lack of opportunities for employment and career advancement for Canadians with disabilities has negative impacts not only for the individual, but also for the Canadian economy. A more inclusive economy is a stronger economy, with more opportunity to grow. As many Canadian companies are facing unprecedented labour shortages,⁴ creating more opportunities for individuals from under-represented groups can help fill talent gaps. Employers, governments, and policy-makers can consider these advantages and implement policies that reduce barriers and increase career advancement opportunities for PwD.

We spoke with 30 Canadian workers and job seekers who identify as having a disability to better understand how they experience the workplace. We found that they face many barriers, including perceived discrimination and bias, difficulty securing required accommodations, lack of confidence and motivation, and the risk of losing assistance or benefits. Through these interviews, we also identified strategies that employers and governments can use to remove these barriers and improve the career outcomes of PwD.



1 Canadian Human Rights Commission, *Roadblocks on the Career Path*; Future Skills Centre, *Skills Gaps, Underemployment, and Equity of Labour-Market Opportunities*; and Statistics Canada, *A Demographic, Employment and Income Profile*.

2 Statistics Canada, *A Demographic, Employment and Income Profile*.

3 Gupta, Sukhai, and Wittich, "Employment Outcomes and Experiences"; Statistics Canada, "Impacts of COVID-19 on Persons With Disabilities"; Statistics Canada, *A Demographic, Employment and Income Profile*; and Conference Board of Canada, The, "Career Able."

4 Statistics Canada, "Labour Shortage Trends in Canada"; and Causa and others, "The Post-COVID-19 Rise in Labour Shortages."

Barriers to career advancement

How do the experiences of PwD in the workplace interfere with opportunities for career advancement?

Ableism in the workplace

Ableism is a form of discrimination that stems from the belief that “one’s abilities or characteristics are determined by disability or that people with disabilities as a group are inferior to non-disabled people.”⁵ Even those who mean well can display ableist attitudes or behaviours.⁶

Ableism is one of the most notable and pervasive barriers preventing many PwD from advancing in their careers. Nearly all interviewees reported that they’d experienced ableist attitudes and discrimination at some point in their careers. Common examples of ableism in the workplace include:

- underestimating the capacity for PwD to perform certain job functions—for example, employers may assume that PwD lack certain skills for a job without first asking whether any accommodations could make the role more accessible to a person with a disability;
- overestimating the time and money associated with providing accommodations and making a position more accessible—PwD often require only small modifications (e.g., flexible work arrangements, assistive technology).

These findings echo the literature, which demonstrates that qualified PwD are often overlooked for employment and career advancement opportunities.⁷

“For a lot of companies, there’s still fear and stigma around hiring people with disabilities, and how much it’s going to cost them in accommodations.”

Interview participant

To address the identified barriers, employers shouldn’t make assumptions about how a person’s disability/ies might affect their job performance. Instead of immediately deeming an individual unfit for an opportunity, employers should speak directly with the individual to better understand their capabilities and any supports they require. In doing so, employers can build trust and ensure that PwD are provided with equal opportunities for advancement in the workplace.

5 Linton, *Claiming Disability*.

6 Friedman, “Aversive Ableism”; and Friedman, “Conscious and Unconscious Disability Attitudes.”

7 Jones, Finkelstein, and Koehoorn, “Disability and Workplace Harassment and Discrimination”; Lindsay and others, “Ableism and Workplace Discrimination”; Nangia and Arora, “Discrimination in the Workplace in Canada”; and TELUS, “Canadians With Disabilities.”

Difficulty securing accommodations

We heard from interview participants that requesting and accessing required accommodations can sometimes take months, and they're rarely available upon onboarding. This means that when PwD start a new job, many of them aren't set up with the tools that they need to succeed. By the time they have secured their required accommodations, some PwD may be reluctant to apply to new opportunities for fear of having to undergo yet another cumbersome accommodation process. This barrier makes it difficult for many PwD to transition to higher-paying, more secure positions. Participants also fear that accommodation requests may be perceived by the employer as a burden, which adds further anxiety to an already daunting process.

"I know of one employee who has an invisible disability⁸ who came on board and her onboarding was terrible. There was no software ... even though she made the request long before."

Interview participant

Ensuring that all workers have the supports they need to succeed is beneficial not only for the individual, but also for the organization. Workers who feel supported and respected by their employers are often happier, healthier, and more engaged employees.⁹ Removing obstacles from the accommodation process and making sure that necessary supports are available from the start of recruitment and onboarding are key to workplace inclusion.

8 A physical, mental, or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside yet can limit or challenge a person's movements, senses, or activities.

9 Hougaard, "The Power of Putting People First"; and Rogers, "Do Your Employees Feel Respected?"

Lack of confidence and motivation

Many interviewees reported that repeated negative experiences in the workplace, such as facing discrimination, being passed over for opportunities, and not receiving accommodations, can lead to lower self-confidence and motivation. PwD may blame themselves and their disability/ies for not progressing in their careers and ultimately feel isolated, hopeless, and unable to progress. A lack of support and understanding from employers and co-workers may also contribute to low self-esteem and reinforce barriers to success and advancement in their careers.¹⁰

"If [the position is] not accessible for whatever reason, then it reinforces the negative stereotypes that we ourselves have created in our own minds, and other people have created around us. It affects [our] capability, and it also reinforces the image that 'I don't matter, I don't belong.'"

Interview participant

Generating more awareness, understanding, and support for PwD in the workplace can help to boost their confidence and motivation, allowing them to feel more engaged in their work.¹¹ A positive work environment for PwD is a key part of workplace inclusion and essential to ensuring that PwD have equal opportunities to succeed.

10 Krauss and Orth, "Work Experiences and Self-Esteem Development."

11 International Labour Organization, "The Win-Win of Disability Inclusion"; Lindsay and others, "A Systematic Review"; and van Niekerk, Maguvhe, and Magano, "How Education, Training and Development Support the Wellness of Employees with Disabilities."

Risk of losing assistance or benefits

Some interview participants emphasized that the risk of losing either government or employer benefits can be a huge deterrent to advancing in their careers and earning higher wages. Living with a disability is associated with a higher cost of living, particularly if one requires physical supports, such as a wheelchair or medication.¹² While governments do subsidize some of these costs, disability support is often available only to those whose assets or income are under a certain cut-off. For example, the Ontario Disability Support Program is available only to those whose assets are under \$40,000 in value (or \$50,000 for a couple).¹³ While some regions offer disability support to those in higher-income brackets (e.g., British Columbia offers disability assistance to PwD whose assets are under \$100,000 in value¹⁴), other regions provide this type of assistance only to PwD who can't meet their basic needs.¹⁵

Asset and/or income limits for receiving disability support can significantly impede career progression, particularly when the limit is relatively low. PwD may be discouraged from seeking higher-paying employment if it means that they would no longer receive government assistance. For some individuals, earning a lower salary but ensuring that costs associated with their disability are covered may be preferable to moving up in their career and risking having to pay high out-of-pocket costs.

Some PwD may also be reluctant to transition from a low-paying and/or precarious job that provides medical and mental health benefits to a higher-paying, more secure job that doesn't. Access to medical and mental health benefits can be especially important to PwD who require ongoing medical and/or mental health support. A few participants noted that once they secure a job with benefits, it can be very hard to leave.

“One of the biggest challenges is the whole [Ontario Disability Support Program] thing—if your wheelchair breaks, they cover that. Once you're employed, it's extremely difficult to still maintain those benefits, because you have to report your income constantly.”

Interview participant



¹² Angus Reid Institute, “Canadians Concerned About Disability Poverty.”

¹³ Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, “Ontario Disability Support Program Eligibility.”

¹⁴ Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, “Disability Assistance.”

¹⁵ For example, Department of Families, “Manitoba Supports for Persons With Disabilities.”

Recommendations

How can employers and governments work together to create a more accessible labour market?

More disability awareness training

Participants reported that employers often lack the training required to provide accessible recruitment, retention, and advancement policies for PwD. Canadian workplaces generally lack awareness about how to work with and support PwD. More company-wide disability training can help eliminate ableist attitudes and discrimination in the workplace and improve the experiences of PwD. By creating a more understanding and supportive workplace environment, employers can help PwD feel more valued and engaged in their work and ultimately more motivated to progress in their careers.¹⁶

Some workplace training programs are more effective than others. The type of training that managers and leaders need will also likely differ from the type of training that co-workers need. See [Appendix B](#) for selected resources on building disability-inclusive workplaces.

“The resources need to be aimed at employers, and particularly at the managers of [PwD,] because that is the number one thing that is going to change the way that people with disabilities are perceived in the workplace.”

Interview participant

Accessible recruitment strategies

Recruitment and onboarding strategies need to be accessible from the very start. Participants noted that job postings should be transparent about the kind of work that is required, as well as any physical demands—such as having to frequently walk between buildings, or having to help with setting up and tearing down an event—so that PwD can better understand whether the job suits them. Multiple PwD reported instances in which they secured employment and were then asked to do tasks that were inaccessible to them and weren’t included in the job description.

Employers should also ensure that accommodations are available to anyone from the first stage of the recruitment and onboarding process.

“Workplaces need to take [accessibility] factors into consideration in terms of their HR policies, their hiring process, their onboarding procedures to make sure they are equitable for people with disabilities. Supports need to be put in place to make sure that more people with disabilities can participate in a job search and get employed.”

Interview participant

¹⁶ International Labour Organization, “The Win-Win of Disability Inclusion”; Lindsay and others, “A Systematic Review”; and van Niekerk, Maguvhe, and Magano, “How Education, Training and Development Support the Wellness of Employees with Disabilities.”

Simplified accommodation processes

Accommodation processes can be very bureaucratic, and requests can take months to get approved. Many PwD can't wait that long—accommodations are often critical to their productivity and well-being in the workplace. Although employers have a legal duty to accommodate, many interview participants reported that there is a lot of perceived negativity from employers surrounding accommodations and they fear that providing accommodations can sometimes be perceived as a burden.

Employers can better support PwD by taking the onus off the individual and making workplace supports available to all new hires from the start. Employers also need to recognize that employee needs are dynamic, meaning that a person's required accommodations may change throughout their time at a company. Managers should consider continually checking in with their employees to ensure that they're receiving the support they need to succeed. Examples of common accommodations or supports include:

- job coaching and employment services for PwD
- accessible or assistive technology
- flexible work location and hours
- a comprehensive benefits package that provides access to medical, physical, and psychological supports

“Everybody is different. Everybody needs to accept one another. Accessibility is not just putting in a ramp or making a [crosswalk] beep—accessibility is so much more extensive than that.”

Interview participant

Government funding and programming

The PwD we interviewed agreed that increasing career advancement opportunities for PwD will require a coordinated effort between employers and governments. Some ways that governments can better support PwD include the following:

- Increase income and/or asset cut-offs for receiving government support for physical and medical costs so that PwD aren't discouraged from finding higher-paying jobs.
- Offer incentives for employers to create more accessible policies and provide more accommodations. Doing so is particularly important for small and medium-sized businesses that want to become more inclusive but don't have the capacity to do so.
- Provide more funding and programming to increase people with disabilities' knowledge about the labour market and career advancement opportunities, and provide paid time off from work for PwD to complete these programs.



Appendix A

Methodology

Background

This project was developed to better understand the barriers that Canadian with disabilities face and identify strategies that employers and governments can take to break down these barriers and improve the career trajectories for PwD. We held 30 interviews with working professionals with disabilities who have expertise in accessible employment. The goal of these interviews was to engage those with lived experience and knowledge of the barriers that PwD face in the workplace.

Research questions

1. What barriers do PwD face when considering opportunities for career advancement?
2. What policy shifts and strategies can employers and government undertake to help reduce or remove any such barriers and improve the workplace experiences and career outcomes of PwD?

Interview sample

The 30 Canadians that we interviewed identified as having various disabilities, including:

- physical disability
- intellectual or learning disability
- psychiatric disability
- vision disability
- hearing disability

Interview methodology and analysis

To recruit participants, we collaborated with organizations such as the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), the Accessibility Institute (formerly READ Initiative), and the Canadian Accessibility Network and asked interviewees to recommend other potential participants and share information about our study with their networks. We also asked interview participants to recommend others who might be interested in participating.

The interviews were semi-structured and explored the interviewees' knowledge and/or experience of barriers and strategies needed to improve workplace opportunities and career outcomes for PwD.

All interviews were transcribed and recorded. Transcripts were anonymized and analyzed in NVivo. To analyze the data, we used a focused coding approach and developed the codebook based on emergent themes in the interviews and literature. Two researchers were responsible for coding the transcripts. We ran iterative inter-rater reliability tests to ensure consistent coding across researchers. We examined themes based on how frequently they were noted.

Sample interview questions

- On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning “Not very likely” and 5 meaning “Very likely,” how likely is it that employees with disabilities successfully transition to another job within, from, or to your organization or elsewhere?
 - If not likely, what factors do you think contribute to people with disabilities' not successfully transitioning to a job, most especially to one that is higher-paying/secure? (E.g., geography, workplace culture, industry sector, pay scale, discrimination.)
 - If likely, what factors do you think contribute to people with disabilities' successfully transitioning from one job to another, most especially to one that is higher-paying/secure? (E.g., geography, workplace culture, industry sector, pay scale, discrimination.)
- Overall, how effective do you think current programming, supports, and investments within your organization, professional community, or elsewhere are at facilitating successful job transitions for people with disabilities?
- What policy or programming shifts do you think may be necessary to improve current programming, supports, and investments for the purpose of facilitating successful job transitions for people with disabilities?

Appendix B

Selected resources

This is a non-exhaustive list of selected resources to help employers create more inclusive workplaces.

Guides, toolkits, and reports

- #AbleTo, “Build Organizational Capacity: Learning Series on Disability Inclusion at Work”
- Accessibility Services Canada, On-Demand Courses
- Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), Clear Print Accessibility Guidelines
- Carli Friedman, “Conscious and Unconscious Disability Attitudes”
- The Conference Board of Canada, Employers’ Toolkit: Making Ontario Workplaces Accessible to People With Disabilities, 2nd Edition
- David C. Onley Initiative for Employment & Enterprise Development, Building Disability Etiquette in the Workplace
- David C. Onley Initiative for Employment & Enterprise Development, Employers Guide to Hiring and Working With Professionals With Disabilities
- David C. Onley Initiative for Employment & Enterprise Development, Employers Guide to Workplace Accommodations
- David C. Onley Initiative for Employment & Enterprise Development, Tips for Employers: Language and Disability
- David C. Onley Initiative for Employment & Enterprise Development, Tips for Employers: Understanding Disability
- Discover Ability Network, “Discover Ability Roadmap”
- Statistics Canada, “Reports on Disability and Accessibility in Canada”

Groups and organizations

- #AbleTo
- Accessibility Institute, Carleton University (formerly READ Initiative)
- Accessibility Services Canada
- Canadian Association of Professionals with Disabilities
- Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work
- Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB)
- Canadian Hearing Services
- Career Edge
- Discover Ability Network
- Inclusion Canada
- March of Dimes Canada
- Ready, Willing and Able
- Specialisterne Canada

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Acknowledgements

This research was prepared with financial support provided through the Future Skills Centre. The Conference Board of Canada is proud to serve as a research partner in the Future Skills Centre consortium. For further information about the Centre, visit the website at fsc-ccf.ca.

The following members of the Conference Board's team contributed to this research: Heather McIntosh, Michael Burt, and Beth Robertson.

We also thank the members of the Research Advisory Board (RAB) who supported this research:

- Sarita Bhatla, former Director General, Canadian Heritage Accessibility Office, Government of Canada
- Louie DiPalma, Vice President, SME Programs, Discover Ability Network
- Dr. Nancy Hansen, Associate Professor and Director of Interdisciplinary Master's Program in Disability Studies, University of Manitoba
- Abidah Lalani-Shamji, former National Director, Government Relations and Advocacy, JDRF
- Mahadeo Sukhai, Director of Research & Chief Inclusion & Accessibility Officer, CNIB

We thank the following members of the RAB for reviewing a draft of this research: Louie DiPalma, Nancy Hansen, and Mahadeo Sukhai.

Opportunity for All: Improving Workplace Experiences and Career Outcomes for Canadians With Disabilities

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To cite this research: Faisal, Tanzeela and Jane Hutchison.

Opportunity for All: Improving Workplace Experiences and Career Outcomes for Canadians With Disabilities. Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2023.

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