

Strategic Directions for Improving Employment Outcomes of Persons with Disabilities

1. Background

Many people with disabilities can work if they are given the appropriate accommodations and supports. Yet there are hundreds of thousands of persons with disabilities in Canada who could work but are not in the workforce. These numbers are likely to increase as the population ages. In spite of many advances, significant barriers and disincentives prevent the full economic participation of persons with disabilities in the workforce.

The Closing the Gap project is a research and consultation process that was undertaken in 2004 and 2005 with the goal of identifying initiatives to improve the employment outcomes of persons with disabilities in the Toronto area. The project had five main components:

- A literature review of recent studies in Canada and other jurisdictions that identified challenges and effective practices in the employment of persons with disabilities.
- Interviews with individuals and organizations in the disabilities community to validate key findings from the literature review and to explore options for effective actions.
- Surveys of over 150 employers and 50 service agencies to obtain quantitative and qualitative data about issues related to the employment of persons with disabilities
- A roundtable of persons with disabilities, frontline agencies and government representatives to share information from the research and consultation process, validate the findings and develop a joint action plan to address key issues. The roundtable was held in November 2004.
- A forum of employers and agencies to develop creative approaches and innovative solutions to improve the participation of persons with disabilities in the workforce. The forum was held in Toronto in September 2005.

Project Map

2. Key findings

Five major themes emerged from the research and consultation process:

- There is widespread agreement within the business community that employing people with disabilities can make good business sense.

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- Employers hire on the basis of ability and the right fit for the job. Sometimes employers find it difficult to focus on the individual's abilities, and see only their disabilities.
- Many employers indicate that they do not know how to recruit people with disabilities and would like help finding qualified job applicants.
- A receptive workplace is essential if persons with disabilities are to succeed in their jobs.
- Although they are the engine of job creation in the economy, smaller firms face different challenges in recruiting and accommodating persons with disabilities than larger employers.

Most organizations that participated in the process are optimistic about the future, and view collaborative efforts as being desirable and necessary. Many innovative and effective practices were identified. These point the way for employers, service agencies, educational institutions, governments and associations – working in collaboration with persons with disabilities - to take action and achieve results.

2.1. The business case for employing persons with disabilities

The business community sees many benefits from employing persons with disabilities:

- Organizations benefit from the positive impact on trust and morale that comes with re-integrating employees who become disabled.
- Making the workplace accessible provides benefits for everyone, and improves the capacity of the organization to recruit new employees, and to reach and service new customers.
- Having persons with disabilities in the workforce can bring knowledge that facilitates growth and change in the organization and contributes to better decision-making.
- Organizations benefit from the contributions of employees with disabilities to the strength and competitiveness of the business – just as they do from their other good employees.

These business considerations are important. They provide the foundation for a substantive and sustainable commitment by the corporate sector to the employment of persons with disabilities.

2.2. Employers hire on the basis of ability

Ability is the critical consideration in hiring any employee. Employers are looking for qualified people with relevant education, skills and experience for the job. Applicants with the skills needed for the available jobs get hired.

The considerations are the same for persons with disabilities as for any other employee. Employers are looking for:

- Qualified workers with the skills and experience needed for the specific position;
- Abilities fitted to the needs of the company; and

- Persons with a strong positive attitude about themselves and their capacity.

The research revealed that employers sometimes find it difficult to focus on the abilities of a job candidate who has a disability. Many employers have little experience, and if they do, it is often with employees who became disabled on the job. Because their experience is limited, they lack insight into the value that people with disabilities can offer as employees.

2.3. Making the match

Matching persons with disabilities to the available job opportunities emerged as a major challenge.

Many employers claim to have problems finding qualified people with disabilities. They are often unsure of how to find and reach persons with disabilities, and how to include them in the recruitment process. Finding individuals with the specific skills and experience employees require can be especially difficult.

Making a good match between the needs of the employer and the skill set and abilities of the employee with a disability is essential. A good match makes for a successful employment experience. It reinforces the commitment of employers to hiring persons with disabilities and gives the employee the experience and confidence that yields long term success in the workforce.

Making the match requires effective linkages. Employers would value help in making the connection to qualified persons with disabilities and would be receptive to a variety of initiatives:

- Most companies are supportive of co-op and work experience initiatives.
- They would value networking opportunities, especially internet-based opportunities.
- Many employers feel that partnerships with service agencies and educational institutions can be important, especially if these organizations are responsive to the specific needs of the employer.
- In situations where job candidates are missing certain qualifications, employers would welcome advice and assistance on training options.

2. 4. Creating a receptive workplace

A receptive workplace is essential if persons with disabilities are to succeed in their jobs. Retention of persons with disabilities in the workforce can be as challenging as recruitment.

Measures to increase employer understanding of disabilities and accommodations are central to success in building a receptive workplace and improving the retention of employees with disabilities.

- Employers are very receptive to assistance that would increase their awareness and understanding of persons with disabilities.
- Employers would particularly value receiving information on accommodation, especially free expert advice on specific accommodations.
- They are very receptive to measures that would build their own capabilities. Resource materials that would help them to adopt effective practices would be valued.
- Most large employers would value measures that develop the skills of managers of persons with disabilities.

2.5. The challenges for small and medium-sized businesses

Most job growth takes place in small business. If significant progress is to be made in increasing the participation of persons with disabilities in the labour force, smaller firms must be part of the solution.

Small and medium-sized firms face different issues in employing persons with disabilities than larger employers:

- Small employers have much less experience with persons with disabilities than large employers. Many large employers have gained experience through compliance with employment equity legislation, which does not apply to companies with fewer than 100 employees.
- While they may have had some experience accommodating employees who became disabled on the job, they have much less experience in recruiting persons with disabilities into their workforces.
- Many smaller companies do not know where to recruit persons with disabilities. Unlike larger employers, small employers do not have specialist staff responsible for human resources and/or diversity.
- Many small and mid-sized employers have no relationships with agencies providing services to persons with disabilities. Most have never been approached by a service agency with respect to recruitment and accommodation.

If significant progress is to be made in increasing the representation of persons with disabilities in the workforce, special attention must be placed on helping smaller firms recruit, accommodate and retain persons with disabilities.

3. Taking action

Most organizations that participated in this process are optimistic about the future. Significant progress can be achieved if employers, service agencies and educational institutions (supported by governments and associations) work more closely together--in conjunction with persons with disabilities--to create opportunities and overcome constraints.

3.1. Industry associations

Associations can play a very important role in helping their members - especially their smaller members - increase job opportunities for persons with disabilities. By working through their association, small and medium-sized firms can achieve much more together than they could alone.

In order to assist members achieve more substantive results, associations should consider the following initiatives:

- Make the employment and accommodation of persons with disabilities a business issue for the association.
- Build a better understanding of disabilities and accommodations that the association can share with its membership.
- Be responsive to the needs of members, especially smaller firms, and provide relevant assistance such as a one-stop resource centre to coordinate qualified job seekers and disseminate hard edge information on accommodations.
- Develop partnerships with agencies and educational institutions to increase the number of qualified candidates who could be hired by member companies and promote internships and co-op placements.

3.2 Employers

Although many employers recognized that employing persons with disabilities can make good business sense, they often knew little about disabilities and accommodations. They may be unaware of the various supports, accommodations and technologies that are available. Breaking the barriers of inertia, myth and misinformation is the first step to making a commitment to opening opportunities for persons with disabilities. To this end, employers should consider the following approaches:

- Identify the business benefits for the company from employing and accommodating persons with disabilities.

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- Be open-minded and respectful of persons with disabilities.
- Seek help and advice, whenever necessary, to better understand disability and accommodation.
- Seek partnerships with service agencies to create opportunities for qualified persons with disabilities, through internships, job placements and other means.
- Ensure that hiring and promotion decisions focus on the individual's abilities, not their disabilities
- Prepare line and staff managers, and peers so that the workplace is receptive to persons with disabilities.
- Set up on-the-job mentoring opportunities for employees with disabilities.

3.3 Service agencies

People with disabilities are a diverse group of individuals with varying needs and circumstances. People with disabilities need access to personalized services that are flexible as well as adaptable to their individual needs. They also require a holistic and coordinated approach that addresses transportation, housing, access to rehabilitation and training, as well as employment.

Many persons with disabilities who are capable of working, have skills that are outdated. Others have skills that they are no longer able to use as a result of a disability. Initiatives to encourage people with disabilities to further their education, develop their skills and participate in on-the-job training will contribute to their acquiring employment.

Qualified candidates need access to real job opportunities. Assisting employers make the match between job seekers and job openings is an essential element in increasing the workforce representation of people with disabilities. To this end, service agencies should consider the following practices:

- Provide job candidates with personalized services tailored to their needs.
- Develop a good understanding of the potential employer. Identify their business drivers, their business needs, and the specific jobs that are available.
- Help to identify potential candidates and do pre-screening.
- Send only candidates who have the qualifications for the jobs that are available.
- Work with candidates to prepare good resumés and to develop interviewing skills.
- Provide employers with advice and assistance on accommodation.

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- Provide managers in the employing organizations with training and awareness on specific disabilities.
- Establish partnerships with employers to promote job placement and employment.

3.4 Governments

Many people with disabilities remain outside the labour force, not because their disability prevents them from working, but because they lack access to necessary accommodations and support services. Even if the appropriate job accommodation is available, support services that enable them to enter and remain in the workforce may not be coordinated to adequately meet their needs. These services include income supports, transportation and training.

Governments have an important role to play in ensuring that accommodation and support services do not act as constraints, keeping job-ready persons with disabilities out of the workforce.

Substantive progress depends strongly on government understanding, leadership and coordination. Particular focus should be placed on the following:

- Be responsive to the needs of the business community.
- Provide information on disabilities and accommodations, and appropriate financial support for necessary accommodations.
- Fund service agencies to provide flexible, personalized services that are adaptable to the specific needs of clients.
- Fund education and training to update the skills and qualifications of job seekers with disabilities.
- Ensure that it is financially advantageous for persons with disabilities to work.
- Foster partnerships with service agencies, educational institutions, employers and associations.