

# Closing the Gap

Workshop at the OBA Conference Centre-November 1, 2004

---

Working Papers Number 1

Workforce Participation of Persons with Disabilities

Prepared by:

**Stuart-O'Hara Inc.**

**Knowledge Management Services**

Employment Supports for Persons with Disabilities –  
Intergovernmental Partnership

This project is funded by  
the Government of Canada

**Canada**

# **WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

*The numbers that appear in brackets refer to the numbered listings in the Literature Review.*

## **ASSESSMENT OF RECENT APPROACHES**

### **A GROWING PRIORITY**

Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a growing international awareness of issues affecting persons with disabilities and growing attention to policies and programs to promote their equitable participation in the labour force (40).

One of the most notable developments in recent years has been a shift from obligations-based employment quotas to rights-based anti-discrimination policy (35, 40). Anti-discrimination legislation – based in large measure on the civil rights legislation of the 1960s – has been enacted in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom (40). In Canada, employment equity legislation has been in place since 1986.

### **PROGRAM DEVELOPMENTS**

Coupled with legislative changes aimed at fostering the full participation of persons with disabilities in society is an evolution in the approach to government programming.

- Initiatives for persons with disabilities are increasingly incorporated within mainstream labour market measures (16, 40). Labour market authorities are providing training and placement services, as well as financial incentives (40).
- Alternatives to publicly provided services are emerging. Private and non-governmental organizations, including disability organizations, are providing counseling, training and placement services, either independently or under contract (40). Co-ordination problems have emerged with the proliferation of providers and fragmentation of responsibility (40).
- On-the-job training (rather than training as a forerunner to placement) is growing in order to make it more responsive to the needs of employers and the market (40).

## *Intergovernmental Partnership – Employment Supports for Persons with Disabilities*

- Results-based funding is being introduced in a number of countries, including the US, Australia and the UK (13). Compensating providers for measured client outcomes (rather than for program activities) promotes greater emphasis on valued outcomes; increased accountability; more efficiency and effectiveness in delivery; and greater choice and satisfaction for clients (13).
- Client-centred services that take an individualized approach are growing. These incorporate basic skills and supports, formal training and one-on-one support alongside practical assistance, for example help with childcare or transport costs (12).

### **OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS**

Ensuring the equitable participation of persons with disabilities continues to be a challenge in many countries (16).

- Different legislative approaches, whether rights-based anti-discrimination policy, obligations-based employment quotas, or incentives-based voluntary action, have tended to promote job retention for current employees rather than significant opportunities for new entrants (34).
- The effectiveness of labour market programs on the employment of persons with disabilities is often not well understood (33, 41). This is attributed to poor program-participation statistics, lack of monitoring and follow-up studies, and general weaknesses in evaluation methods (16, 41).
- While there are marked differences among countries to vocational rehabilitation and training, this type of intervention is usually used too little, and often initiated too late (4, 34). The limited involvement of employers exacerbates this problem (34).

Nevertheless, studies that explore effective practices suggest that client-centered, individualized approaches have relatively greater success (26). Pre-employment activities and assistance with job search is effective in increasing placement rates, and placement planning is related to improved placement outcomes (22).

## **PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: ISSUES AND INFLUENCES**

Work is important for persons with disabilities and is consistently identified as among their top concerns (17, 24). People with disabilities want access to real jobs at livable wages, quick and responsive service, and the ability to control the services they receive (27, 30). Employability of persons with disabilities depends on the severity and type of disability – the less severe, the more likely the person is to have a job (14).

### **JOB READINESS**

As with any population, people with disabilities differ in terms of their readiness for work, as reflected in education, skills, work experience and motivation (31).

A significant determinant of labour market success is education and skills. The higher the level of education, the greater the chances of employment for people who do have disabilities. However, many persons with disabilities lack the requisite training, skills, and related work experience for many jobs (6, 7, 8, 9, 35).

One factor apparent across all disabilities is the importance of both purpose and determination in contributing to successful employment outcomes. Motivation and resourcefulness are important to secure benefits and later to secure employment. (30)

### **WORKPLACE BARRIERS**

Persons with disabilities continue to cite substantial difficulties in gaining access to needed accommodations in the workplace (30, 35).

Even where employers express a willingness to provide accommodation, first-line supervisors – who play a major role in job entry and career development -- are often ill-equipped in terms of knowledge of how to institute accommodations and/or adjustments (3).

Attitudes in the workplace constitute continuing, although invisible, barriers to employment and advancement for persons with disabilities (37, 38). Negative co-worker attitudes can make it difficult to gain access to needed accommodations (7, 11, 30). For example, accommodations such as restructuring work, change in shift schedules and trading tasks are difficult to implement without involving co-workers (11).

Workplace barriers are reduced where there is a supportive supervisor who aids in securing accommodations, educating co-workers about accommodations and disability, protecting confidentiality, and ensuring that co-workers provide tools and information necessary for the individual to complete tasks (30).

## **EMPLOYMENT-RELATED SERVICES**

Consumers and advocates seek a system of accessible services that eliminates or reduces disability-related barriers to employment (17, 27).

They appreciate individualized approaches (30) that target specific needs (30), promote independence (30) and give a sense of progressing along a 'pathway' towards employment (24). Where possible, clients want to design and manage their own employment planning and job-finding strategies, and be able to choose their service providers (27).

Supports and services that enable fuller participation in mainstream society – such as access to computers, assistive technologies, transportation, education and third-party training – are valued (30). Services that raise confidence and self-esteem; open new options; or intervene to prevent or divert problems also are perceived as valuable (2). Clients appreciate the opportunity to discuss their employment prospects with knowledgeable staff (2).

Many of the clients who move into employment feel they need continued ongoing support in the workplace (24).

Job coaches play a key role in securing and maintaining employment for people with developmental disabilities (30). Coaches provide motivation and support; are a source of information about services; mentor and counsel individuals; and, in some cases, accompany individuals on job interviews, and help resolve employment disputes and difficulties (30).

## ***EMPLOYERS: ISSUES AND INFLUENCES***

Employers want someone who can perform to standard in a job. Reliability and productivity are important to their judgments about hiring and retaining a person with a disability (21). Employers also consider the impact on the whole organization, looking at factors such as acceptance, inclusion, and workplace morale (21).

## **BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT**

Although companies may express interest in employing people with disabilities, senior managers often fail to provide the resources, support and strategic reinforcement to turn a work placement into successful employment (3, 7).

Many employers report that making information accessible for a person with a visual or learning disability, or a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, are areas of accommodation that are more

difficult than others (6, 7).

Small businesses are less hospitable for persons with disabilities than large employers. Many small employers feel that it is difficult to employ somebody with a disability or to keep on an employee who became disabled (38). Taking on disabled employees is seen as a major risk; there are concerns about the cost of making adjustments (38). Small businesses have a relatively narrow perception of disability. Disability carries connotations of physical and visible impairments, and there are misunderstandings and prejudices (9).

## **DISABILITY-RELATED SERVICES**

Employers want individualized assistance from a disability employment service; assistance that may be intermittent or continuous over time (21). Employers appreciate on-site consultations and technical assistance, in the area of accommodations or assistive technology (6).

Employers seek help from service providers and other organizations with understanding whether a participant and post were well matched; whether any specific help or support is needed; advice on adaptations to the workplace environment ; access to or support for equipment and training; wage subsidies or other payments; and in-work support (2).

## **EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES**

### **KEY PROGRAM ATTRIBUTES**

The following program attributes are associated with success:

- A case-management approach;
- Dedicated, knowledgeable and experienced frontline staff;
- A continuum of service;
- Engagement of employers; and
- Partnership models.

### **A CASE MANAGEMENT APPROACH**

A case-management approach involves personalized assessments of need and coordination of service packages for individual clients (12).

- Programs are highly client-focused (26). They are flexible or tailored to the needs of each individual (12, 26). A person's likes and dislikes abilities and limitations, housing and family situations, technological needs for school and work, and social and interpersonal skills are all considered and addressed (26). Employment or educational plans are created according

## *Intergovernmental Partnership – Employment Supports for Persons with Disabilities*

to each client's abilities and limitations (26). Client-centered services have been shown to raise clients' self-esteem and confidence and build essential trust between the client and service provider (26).

- The effectiveness of the case management approach contrasts sharply with a call-centre or "team" style of service delivery. Team-based service delivery has been shown to be impersonal, isolating, inefficient and inadequate because the client does not have a specific caseworker who knows him or her (15, 29).
- A pathway model provides clients with a smooth 'pathway' to employment (24). This model often involves filling gaps in service provision (24). Services include recruitment, marketing of activities to potential referrers and employers, assessment of client's whole situation, including work readiness, and planning a program of activities and services, and helping to identify suitable employment opportunities for clients (24).
- Client motivation is important, as is the relationship with the case manager (12). Both are fragile and easily reduced by poor communication, delays and perception of bureaucracy or unsuitable services (12).
- The organization managing the cases can be an important factor to potential client. The transition from dependency on disability benefits to paid employment is a quantum leap. For many the decision to make the transition is affected by the extent to which they believe they can trust the agency delivering the service. Some users are skeptical about the government's commitment to improving the lives of disabled people. For them, a voluntary organization promoting the rights of disabled persons may be perceived as more trustworthy (23).

### **DEDICATED, KNOWLEDGEABLE AND EXPERIENCED FRONTLINE STAFF**

The knowledge, compassion, and skill of staff are important to the success of the service (30). The role of frontline staff emerges as crucial in building trust with clients, as well as delivering training, providing individual support for clients and ensuring they undergo a smooth 'pathway' into employment (24). The ability to develop client trust impacts on both the success of the programs as well as the employment opportunities the programs facilitate (26).

- Dedication and experience are essential (26). Staff must be highly knowledgeable about employability issues and up-to-date on the latest approaches, methods and research to provide the best services possible (5).
- Frontline staff require a wide range of skills (24, 31). In particular, they need a grasp of the everyday effects of impairment or a medical condition (32). They should be aware of new options, and be able to facilitate access to supports and other services (2, 22). On occasion,

## *Intergovernmental Partnership – Employment Supports for Persons with Disabilities*

they may need to intervene to prevent or divert unhelpful developments (2).

- Frontline staff need to develop formal and informal networks of information, expertise and other service providers (2). Mapping services in the area for persons with disabilities can be important (2).

### **A CONTINUUM OF SERVICE**

Every client is unique and requires a different set of services to promote his or her success in the labour market. A strategic approach is facilitated by having a continuum of service that establishes a comprehensive pathway from the point of entry into a program through to employment (24).

Given that persons with disabilities often lack the skills and experience that employers seek, **pre-employment assistance and training** can be very important (12).

- Training programs that reinforce generic skills -- such as self-confidence skills, assertiveness skills, coping with stress, communications skills, and work experience -- are highly ranked by employers (37). They are also useful in work search programs (37).
- Job seekers benefit from training in career planning and job search methods (22). A supported job search process may be useful in implementing career plans and continuing job development efforts (22).
- Effective training initiatives take into account the unique needs of clients. Skilled professionals are able to identify the service needs of persons with disabilities and assist them in making meaningful choices for training and subsequent employment (6). Effective training also requires physical and communication accessibility (1, 6).

Effective **job placement and job matching** services are key.

- Careful targeting of opportunities in the local labour market to areas where there are skills gaps or labour shortages enhances the prospects for job placement (24).
- Effective mobilization of clients – by encouraging their active participation -- and employers – by encouraging their involvement and willingness to open employment opportunities raises the prospects for placements (24).
- Taking into account that successful job placement involves more than simply matching the person to the present requirements of a job. Employers are also concerned about the effects on group and organization performance (21).

## *Intergovernmental Partnership – Employment Supports for Persons with Disabilities*

- Expanding the concept of job matching to include a broader, longer term focus that takes into account changes to jobs and workplaces over time as well (21).
- Using a temporary staffing agency as a transition into full-time employment for people with disabilities. This has proven to be an effective way to determine if such a match works. In some cases, the use of a temporary agency has made it easier for people with disabilities to get a job because an employer can find out if a situation would be feasible before making a commitment (10).

Employment retention and advancement of persons with disabilities can be increased with ***in-work support of employers*** (12, 31).

- Staff from service organizations can help new employers of persons with disabilities. In particular, they are able to assess the employer's support capacity and provide advice on disability and accommodations (31).
- They can help employers to access evaluations and accommodation recommendations from assistive technology centres (22). They also can act as advocate for changes or additions to an employee's job tasks (22).
- Follow-up consultation with participants and with their employers can assist in maintaining employment and in facilitating job advancement beyond entry level (22). Ongoing assistance to participants can also ensure that home support and transportation are adequate and that new problems are resolved (22).

### **ENGAGING EMPLOYERS**

A lack of understanding of the issues from the perspective of employers can seriously compromise employment outcomes for people with a disability. The identification of any impediments and strategies to address impediments from the perspective of employers is critical for effective employment outcomes, keeping in mind that a "successful" outcome for an employee is also a successful employer outcome (21). Engaging employers as partners in the employment process is an ingredient to success. Pro-active relations with employers lead to better outcomes in terms of the employment of persons with disabilities (26, 42).

- Effective practices include develop a good understanding of the local business environment (24). Employers are viewed as 'customers' with their own varied needs (24). Specific initiatives may involve working directly with employers to achieve job-outcomes, raising awareness and including them as partners (24, 38). It also involves using the employer's 'language' and responding to their individual business needs (24, 37).
- Educating and raising awareness of employers is important (2, 9, 14, 26, 28, 38). Effective

## *Intergovernmental Partnership – Employment Supports for Persons with Disabilities*

practices focus on countering the myths and misconceptions about disability (9, 43), seeking the commitment and support of senior management (6, 7), providing a general education and awareness campaign about the breadth of disability (35, 37, 38) and the need for easily accessible, concise and practical examples of best practices (9, 38).

- On-going communication assists both employers and clients for the duration of the placement (26). Clients and employers both value this three-way communication as it provides both parties a point of contact to discuss issues that arise. Employers indicate that this support is often a catalyst for them to provide job placement opportunities (26).

### **PARTNERSHIP MODELS**

Partnership models provide benefits for both service providers and employers. For service providers, partnerships can provide an important source of additional resources, advice and credibility in new areas (24, 25). Partnerships with employers are one of the most important tools to allow clients a chance to get a job placement as well as increasing their chances of employment after the placement (26) For employers, partnerships can increase their access to on-site consultation and necessary technical assistance (6).

- Information sharing is a key area where corporations and disability organizations can strengthen their capacities to deal with each other and promote better responses to disability (8). In addition, corporations need to create equitable relationships with disability organizations through shared decision-making, not just using them to provide support or services (8).
- For disability employment service organizations, successful partnership initiatives start with developing sensitivity to the beliefs, values, attitudes, and needs of the employer and the employing organization (21).
- A partnership approach between a service organization and an employer may also include ongoing informal support and may well include joint activities such as awareness building, co-worker training, and supervisor training (21).
- Alliances with service organizations and disability organizations can help employers access needed on-site consultation and necessary technical assistance, whether in the area of accommodations or assistive technology (6).

### ***FUTURE DIRECTIONS***

Countries around the world are looking for effective ways to improve the employment situation of persons with disabilities. It is clear that better outcomes can be achieved with changes to service delivery. In particular, services that are based on an individualized approach that

incorporates basic skills and supports, formal training and one-on-one support produce better results for persons with disabilities.

## **THE LIMITS TO ACTIVE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS**

Active employment programs for disabled persons are necessary but not sufficient. In many cases, the employment and training services need to be complemented by other programs and services that provide practical assistance, for example with childcare or transport (3, 12).

In addition, income support and disability benefit systems continue to be a major constraint on employment for persons with disabilities. In many countries disability benefit programs have often functioned as early retirement programs (34). In most countries, income support continues to penalize the disabled person for taking up work (25). In many countries, people with disabilities may forgo, or put at risk, health or drug benefits by participating in the labour force (15, 30).

The ongoing problem of prejudice and discrimination against persons with disabilities cannot be ignored (2, 7, 8, 28 37). Even where employment equity legislation applies, people with disabilities benefit less than other designated groups (16, 32).

Effective labour market programs for persons with disabilities that are implemented without considering changes to the broader policy framework will fall short of the desired outcomes.

## **OECD RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM**

The recent OECD Report, *Transforming Ability into Disability (2003)*, provides a systematic analysis of a wide range of labour market and social protection programs in 20 countries aimed at persons with disabilities. This report provides a broad set of recommendations that envisage a new approach to disability policy that emphasizes activation, tailored early intervention, the removal of disincentives to work, the development of a culture of mutual obligations, and the involvement of employers (34).

In particular, the OECD recommends that:

- Societies need to change the way they think about disability and those affected by it. The term “disabled” should no longer be equated with “unable to work”.
- Each disabled person should be entitled to a “participation package” adapted to individual needs and capacities. This package could contain rehabilitation and vocational training, job search support, work elements from a wide range of forms of employment (regular, part-time, subsidized, sheltered) and benefits in cash or in kind.

*Intergovernmental Partnership – Employment Supports for Persons with Disabilities*

- New obligations for disabled people should be introduced. Benefit receipt should in principle be conditional on participation in employment, vocational rehabilitation and other integration measures
- Involving employers is crucial to the successful reintegration of disabled persons. Different approaches exist, ranging from moral suasion and anti-discrimination legislation to compulsory employment quotas. The effectiveness of the measures depends on the willingness of employers to help disabled persons stay in or enter work (which can be influenced through incentives aimed at raising labour demand), but also on the effectiveness of sanctions for non-compliance.
- Early intervention can in many cases be the most effective measure against long-term benefit dependence. As soon as a person becomes disabled, a process of tailored vocational intervention should be initiated, where appropriate, including, e.g. job search, rehabilitation and/or further training.
- Benefit entitlements should be designed such that the disabled person is not penalized for taking up work.
- Program administration should be reformed. Implementation of a one-stop approach will help caseworkers manage the full menu of available interventions and promote equal access to all programs for all people. At the same time, a more individual approach will place a wide range of new demands on disability caseworkers. They will need an extensive knowledge of the range of available benefits and services. More time will be required to assist individuals and follow each case.
- Disability initiatives programs should be designed as active programs. Disability benefit systems have often functioned as early retirement programs, providing a route for quasi-permanent exit from the labour market. Emphasizing activation and the mutual obligations of both society and the disabled person moves disability policy closer to the underlying logic of unemployment programs, which expect an active contribution and effort from beneficiaries.