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Employment Accessibility Standards for the Recruitment and Retention of People with Disabilities

Final Report

2023

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FOREWORD

As people with disabilities, who make up at least one in five Canadians, we appreciated the opportunity to share our experiential knowledge to help shape the employment standards recommendations to Accessibility Standards Canada.

Our hopes for this project likely exceed its ability to spark change. That's not to say it isn't a worthy catalyst – only that failure of imagination is not among our disabilities. Our visions are not informed by the limits of the current hiring and retention practices that form the skeleton of organizational status quo. Indeed, it's out of such long held practices our disabilities are born.

Some of us can contort ourselves, to varying degrees, to meet requirements designed to weed us out; we are called high functioning – the polite term for someone who can adjust to widespread ideals of normalcy, generally at a cost to their own mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Visible or not, some of us simply cannot bend.

Well-earned gaps in our resumes snowball into holes in our experience, qualifications, and knowledge. A disproportionate number of us graze poverty lines in low paying jobs or with disability payments, filled with outdated conditions, which keep us alive while impeding our upward mobility.

And so, we dream of an equitable society where we're given the tools and support to reach our presently untapped potentials.

The *Accessible Canada Act*, which builds on an existing human rights framework, supports equality for people with disabilities. As employers, we hope you will connect and engage with us in an open and transparent dialogue on how to make hiring and retention equitable – on how to provide dedicated support and opportunities so that we might fully participate in the workforce.

We seek meaningful, not menial, work. We hope all employers will acknowledge, secure, support and invest in platforms that equip us with accessible and flexible resources to help us not only gain careers, but also thrive and advance in them.

We hope for leadership and decision-making opportunities as opposed to gatekeepers, however well-meaning, who make choices on our behalf – decisions that don't reflect the requirements and demands of those with diverse abilities. We hope that you see our true potential within.

Finally, we need allies to bring about these changes. As marginalized people, we sometimes struggle to mobilize; outreach and collaboration between persons with disabilities and employers, employment agencies and public representatives are therefore urgently needed.

Some of us have struggled for too long to find the words to speak about – to comprehend – the effects decades of marginalization have had on us. But we have found those words. Fellow Canadians, we are silent no more.

We hope these comments resonate with you. And if so, that your actions towards building a more inclusive employment experience for Canadians with disabilities will speak even louder.

Sincerely,

The Persons with Experiential Knowledge Working Group composed of Canadians with lived experience of disability (Amelia Cooper, Natalie Beanland, Gent Ng, and Irina Voronin)

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the background, project activities, and final research findings of the *Employment Accessibility Standards for the Recruitment and Retention of People with Disabilities* project. The goal of the project was to explore employers' recruitment, hiring and retention practices and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies with respect to people with disabilities. The findings from the project can help inform Accessibility Standards Canada's development of employment standards under the *Act to Ensure a Barrier-free Canada (Accessible Canada Act)*, 2019.

The objective of the *Accessible Canada Act* is to enhance the full and equal participation of all individuals in society, including people living with disabilities, through the identification, removal, and prevention of barriers in areas under federal jurisdiction. The aim is to achieve a "barrier-free" Canada by 2040. This includes helping address the barriers people with disabilities face in finding work, on the job, and ensuring that they have equal access to advancement opportunities throughout their careers (Accessibility Standards Canada, 2021).

According to the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability, only 59 per cent of Canadians with disabilities aged 25 to 64 are employed, compared to 80 per cent of Canadians without disabilities. People with disabilities earn less than Canadians without disabilities and are more likely to live in poverty. Among those with disabilities aged 25 to 64 years who were not employed and not currently in school, it is estimated that 39 per cent or nearly 645,000 people with disabilities had the potential to work (i.e., those non-working individuals who might be likely to enter paid employment under more inclusive and accessible conditions) (Morris et al., 2018).

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Employment standards under the *Accessible Canada Act* will identify where people with disabilities may face barriers and develop standards to encourage active and inclusive participation of people at every phase of the employment lifecycle: recruitment, hiring, onboarding, retention, individual accommodations, return to work, performance management, fair pay, career/job development/advancement, and job exit (Standards Development Technical Committees – Employment Terms of Reference).

The *Employment Accessibility Standards for the Recruitment and Retention of People with Disabilities* project focused primarily on the first half of the employment lifecycle – from recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and retaining employees with disabilities – by working directly

with employers, including those in federally-regulated sectors. The project explored how standards can align with employers' current DEI strategies and employment approaches, highlighting areas where standards can support and reinforce promising practices. The project also considered where standards can play a role in enforcing minimum accessibility employment requirements.

Project partners

The project team involved a partnership between SRDC researchers and MacLeod Silver HR Business Partners that leveraged the resources and experiences from the BC Partners in Workforce Innovation initiative (BC WiN). BC WiN provides job matching services and employer capacity supports to employers in British Columbia. At the centre of the BC WiN model is a team of Inclusive Workforce Consultants (IWC) with human resources knowledge and experience that assist employers in hiring and retaining people with disabilities. The IWC team connects to a network of employment service agencies for referrals and other supports to meet the employers' workforce and hiring needs. In this project, IWC team members Jamie Millar-Dixon and Jasmine Marchant worked with a group of employers to understand their DEI goals and objectives with respect to the accessible recruitment and retention of people with disabilities. Employers were also invited to participate in a Community of Practice (CoP) to share information on how to identify and remove barriers within their organizations and business networks.

The project included partnerships with national disability-serving organizations, including Neil Squire Society, Magnet and The Discover Ability Network, CBDC Restigouche, and the Autism-Intellectual Disability National Resource and Exchange (AIDE), who were engaged through a National Advisory Committee. Membership of the Advisory Committee included employers with experience in accessible and inclusive employment (including London Drugs, Toronto Metropolitan University, and Port of Vancouver among others). The Committee provided overall strategic direction on the project, made recommendations on project activities, and provided feedback on the research findings.

A working group of people with lived experience of disability (People with Experiential Knowledge – PwEK) reviewed and provided guidance on project activities and findings. The working group was chaired by a self-advocate with lived experience. The PwEK working group provided their expertise as individuals living with disabilities and their lived experience of navigating employment barriers in their own lives, reflections on their strengths and capacity to find creative solutions to systemic barriers, and input on how their experiences could be reflected in the project reports.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

THE FOUR PILLARS OF ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT

The project worked with a group of employers to refine and explore the application of a practice-based framework developed by BC WiN referred to as the Four Pillars of Accessible and Inclusive Employment. The Four Pillars – Commitment, Readiness, Recruitment, and Retention – initially emerged through BC WiN’s work with employer partners, service partners, government, and educational organizations to identify results-based actions in the recruitment, hiring, and retention of people with disabilities (BC WiN, 2018).

The research activities for the project took up the Four Pillars framework to further develop, refine, and add evidence-based actions identified in a literature review and environmental scan of employer toolkits, guidance documents, and reports. The research team also received further input to validate components under each pillar from subject matter experts in the form of key informant interviews and consultations. The Four Pillars framework was then incorporated into an employer self-assessment, which was administered by the IWC team with twelve employers. Of these employers, seven participated in research interviews to share their experiences, DEI strategies, and articulate specific practices in accessible and inclusive recruitment and retention of people with disabilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

An initial literature review targeted promising practices and approaches related to accessibility in the workplace. This included a search of online research databases and a relevant selection of grey literature sources to provide context with respect to the evolving policy landscape of accessibility and employment in Canada. The preliminary search aimed to generate articles from applied research literature on employment practices, and then expanded to include theoretical perspectives to offer a critical lens to understanding disability in the workplace.

As work with employer partners evolved throughout the project, subsequent targeted literature reviews and scans were conducted to deepen evidence and document potential approaches related to accessible recruitment, hiring, and retention (e.g., job applications, interview approaches, approaches to disclosure, onboarding, and management styles). Relevant reports were also located through referrals and online searches to identify a selection of grey literature sources, including guidance available to employers for implementing accessible practices.

INTERVIEWS AND CONSULTATIONS

Primary research data was collected through key informant interviews, expert consultations, and employer interviews. In total, 35 individuals were engaged in these activities, which included people who voluntarily self-identified as having lived experience of disability.

Key informant interviews

Eleven subject matter experts participated in key informant interviews, which took place between May and July 2021 over Zoom video conferencing software, each lasting around one hour. Informants were selected for the expertise in addressing barriers to employment for people with disabilities. These included three specialists and leaders from national disability service organizations, including National Advisory Committee members, and three organizations that bring together supported employment service providers and organizations representing employers to help workplaces become more inclusive and hire more diverse talent. Informants also included four people with lived experience – two serving to connect employers to diverse talent, one serving as co-chair for an Employee Resource Group with a federally-regulated employer, and one organizational specialist with experience leading DEI initiatives in the higher education and communications sectors. Informants also included one subject matter expert in workplace standards development. A semi-structured interview protocol was prepared to explore informants' experience working to address accessibility in the workplace, their views on employers' current capacity to adopt more inclusive approaches to hiring people with disabilities, and their reflections on promising practices, key factors to success, and how employment standards might impact employer behaviour.

Expert consultations

Throughout the project, the research team consulted with a range of subject matter experts on the development of the Four Pillars framework. In the initial phases of the project, the research team held information-sharing meetings with representatives from the provincial governments of Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia to share their perspectives working within new or well-established provincial accessibility legislation on the challenges and opportunities employers face in achieving more accessible and inclusive workplaces.

As findings were incorporated into the Four Pillars framework and tested through employer assessments, the project team also held consultation meetings with additional subject matter experts. These included DEI specialists with experience working with large, federally regulated employers, and meetings with representatives from two national labour union organizations. Consultations began with the project team presenting a summary of the Four Pillars framework

and interim research findings, with a semi-structured interview guide to explore specific employment contexts (e.g., unionized workplaces) and receive further input and refinement into the actions identified in the Four Pillars framework.

Employer recruitment and participation

Employers were recruited by the IWC team, beginning with the formation of the Community of Practice (CoP) in early 2021. The purpose of the CoP was for employers to provide insights into promising practices, tools, and enabling approaches to inform employment accessibility standards development. The IWC team conducted outreach activities with a group of BC employers who were already engaged through BC WiN and quarterly CoP meetings were held in 2021.

In February 2022, the project team expanded outreach activities to employers across Canada by holding a virtual learning event share out interim research findings and provide feedback on the Four Pillars framework. The event drew over 100 participants from employers across Canada, as well as national and provincial disability serving organizations, policymakers, and stakeholders. Throughout 2022, ten employers met with the IWC team to undertake the Four Pillars assessment to provide overall feedback on the framework. Some employers provided examples of policies, practices, and approaches to illustrate actions under the Four Pillars. These examples were systematically analyzed and catalogued to denote the tool type, who the tool is for, what practices are embedded in the tool, and how the tool speaks to the pillar practices. Analysis also included identification of the transferable characteristics evident across the tools that could contribute to the project objectives of identifying promising DEI practices and leadership with respect to hiring and retaining people with disabilities.

Seven employers also took part in research interviews over Zoom. A semi-structured interview protocol was prepared to explore employers' application of the Four Pillars, promising practices to inform accessible employment standards, and key challenges and opportunities of addressing barriers in the workplace. All seven interviews were with HR specialists working in talent acquisition roles, general HR roles, or in DEI specialist and organizational capacity roles.

In January 2023, the project team held an in-person employer-focused learning event in Vancouver, BC to review research findings and gather further employer input on the Four Pillars framework. In attendance were representatives from over 50 employers, organizations serving people with disabilities, as well as the BC provincial and federal governments. The event included a breakout session to collect additional examples and perspectives on the Four Pillars. As a result of the event, two additional employers engaged with the IWC team to participate in the assessment, for a total of twelve employers at the end of the project. Due to the positive response, the IWC team also organized a follow-up learning event in February 2023 for employers to learn more about applying the Four Pillars to their organizations.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND IMPACT OF COVID-19

It should be noted that key research activities conducted in this project were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic which limited the extent to which the research team was able to follow employers' implementation of DEI priorities while they were addressing more immediate organizational pressures. The project team experienced some delays and challenges engaging employers on a sustained and continuous basis during the course of the project. In 2020 and 2021, these challenges stemmed primarily from the pressures organizations were under to support their workforces and sustain operations in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. As businesses resumed their operations in 2022, HR professionals were under intense pressure to meet emerging recruitment needs while providing support to their leadership and employees on new workplace policies and practices.

Another challenge of the research was the overwhelming preference of individuals engaged in the research to contribute their perspectives anonymously as individual professionals with DEI experience, professionals who were working with people with disabilities, and as people with lived experience of disability. In most cases, individuals consented to participate in the research activities on condition that they were providing their own perspectives and insights as they did not have the authority to speak on behalf of their employer or organization. In the interests of capturing as many perspectives as possible, the research team agreed to exclude any information that may identify these individuals or their employers in the project reporting.

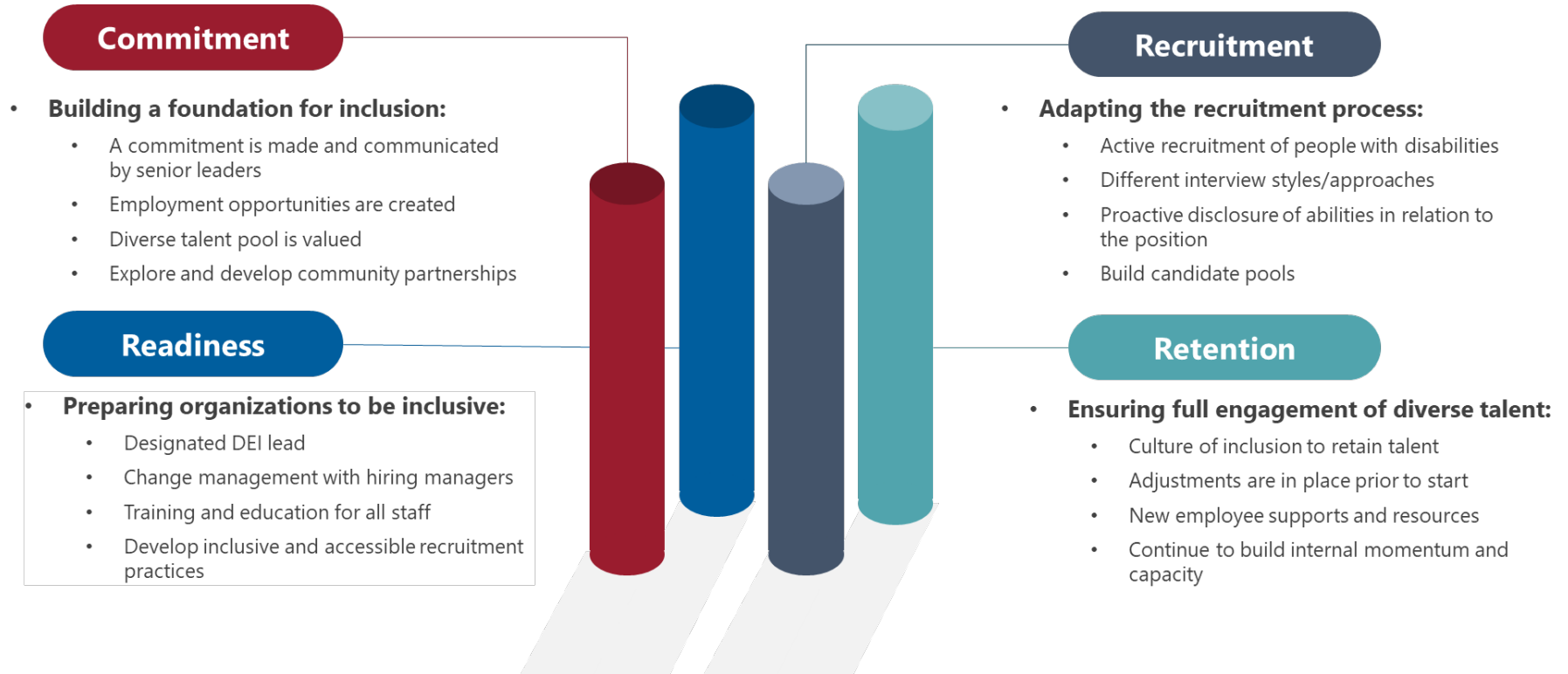
With respect to the Four Pillars assessment, aggregated results could not be reviewed for any trends or comparative analysis given the small number and specific contexts of individual employers. Given the impact of COVID-19, researchers were not able to follow as originally planned the implementation of specific DEI priorities or actions and could not conduct on-site observations. While research interviews were useful in identifying promising practices, several aspects of the Four Pillars framework could not be confirmed due to the limited experience of employers in applying them. Given these limitations, the research team supplemented activities to collect other data (e.g., literature review, environmental scan, consultations) to expand and validate the findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research findings are organized according to the Four Pillars of Accessible and Inclusive Employment, a practice-based framework first documented through BC WiN's work to identify results-based actions in the recruitment, hiring, and retention of people with disabilities. The IWC team used the Four Pillars as a roadmap for their work with employers to identify areas of opportunity to improve processes, capacity, and required resources and supports to help them in their employment of people with disabilities. This process of elaboration, validation, and testing of the Four Pillars model with employers provided important insights into employers' experiences, challenges and opportunities when pursuing their DEI objectives across the employment lifecycle.

Evidence gathered in initial research activities contributed to an iterative design process between researchers and the IWC team to identify evidence-based actions to confirm or elaborate specific pillars. The team worked together to refine and expand the framework from an initial list of 25 to 66 actions under the Four Pillars. The Four Pillars framework was then translated into an employer self-assessment, which was administered by the IWC team with employers. Subsequent phases of the research focused on working with employers to apply the Four Pillars to improve and refine their DEI plans, workplace policies and practices through consultation and training. The research team gathered insights into the employers' HR policies and practices, the extent to which the Four Pillars framework was applied in DEI plans to support accessibility and inclusion, and validated the findings through further research and consultation with subject matter experts.

Figure 1 The Four Pillars of Accessible and Inclusive Employment



EMPLOYER ASSESSMENT

Organizational assessment has been recognized as an important strategy in DEI management to reflect on organizational strengths and opportunities for improvement, typically organized around a series of best-practice statements or examples. Self-assessments vary in length; they can be complemented with other data collection methods and evidence such as employee interviews, focus groups, and document reviews (Trenerry & Paradies, 2021; Iwanaga et al., 2021; Polanco, 2020). In the context of DEI organizational assessments, common domains are typically evaluated: leadership commitment/governance; HR practices (e.g., recruitment, performance management, promotion, training); organizational culture; measurement and tracking; integrating DEI across the value chain (e.g., consideration of DEI in product design, development, marketing, and procurement); and outreach/partnerships to continue to develop the pipeline (Polanco, 2020).

The research team reviewed a selection of benchmarking tools and approaches to track DEI – with a focus on people with disabilities – to provide more comparative context for the Four Pillars assessment, including formats, response scales, and key domains of accessible and inclusive employment (see Appendix A for details). In consultation with the IWC team, the research team formatted the actions to be assessed into practice statements, drawing from the research evidence and tools reviewed. The questions were organized according to the following scale: 1- *Have not started work in this area*; 2- *Planning and development underway*; 3- *This is in place, and we have evidence of its use*; 4- *This is well-established, and the employer models it for others*; and 5- *Don't know/unable to assess*.

The Four Pillars assessment (see Appendix B for details) was introduced by the IWC team as a self-administered tool to be completed by employers with their internal teams and then reviewed jointly with the IWC team in one-on-one meetings, for a total of twelve assessments. Unlike some of the other organizational assessments reviewed by the research team, the goal was not to formally evaluate employers or submit them to a ranking exercise. Instead, the tool was used in the project as a qualitative instrument to better understand employers' current approaches to accessible and inclusive employment, identify key areas of strength, and help prioritize additional actions that aligned with their organization's DEI goals.

Employer feedback on the assessment

Feedback from employers in interviews highlighted that the assessment process was helpful for documenting the actions that their organizations had already taken to be accessible and inclusive according the Four Pillars model. In general, employers conveyed that it was a useful exercise in taking stock and to review other ways that they could advance inclusive and accessible

employment. While some employers approached the assessment process to provide overall feedback on the Four Pillars or contribute examples of how certain actions were applied, two employers were able to use the information from the assessment to help inform their strategic accessibility planning and priority setting with their organization:

“Going through all this very specific criteria and ways of describing what good would look like was helpful to remind [us] to refresh our memories of what we’ve been doing... One of the things I loved about the exercise is it really makes it actionable because the questions are so specific, it really gives you a good sense of what actions are associated with any topic. So it really made it feel like it was easy to go through it, pull out [the] very obvious [places] where there’s some gaps and then and really identify from those gaps where [we could] prioritize action.” (Interview 26)

Given that many employers were in the early phases of accessibility and inclusion planning, they concluded that having a framework to understand overall organizational maturity and concrete ideas of actions they could take to advance their goals was the main outcome of the assessment. As well, employers who participated in the January 2023 event conveyed the usefulness of the Four Pillars framework. A post-event survey was circulated to participants regarding their overall satisfaction with the event. The survey included the question: *“Did you find the Four Pillars Model (Commitment. Readiness. Recruitment. Retention) useful to you as you move forward with plans to increase workforce inclusion of people with disabilities?”* All event participants who responded to the survey (n=32) answered “yes”.

THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

Prior to examining the findings that emerged under each of the Four Pillars, it is important to note the importance of a social model of disability as the foundation of accessible and inclusive employment. A social model of disability holds that the locus of disadvantage or restriction of activity to social arrangements and institutional norms that, while in themselves are alterable, require a reorientation away from the individual’s “difference” and towards a model of collective responsibility (Goering, 2015). A social model of disability was strongly emphasized in the public consultations leading to the *Accessible Canada Act* defined as, “anything that prevents or limits people with disabilities from being fully included or able to do the same activities as people without disabilities, should be considered a barrier” (ESDC, 2017). A social model of disability establishes a different orientation to inclusion than a medical model as it is underpinned by principles of collective responsibility/collaboration to identify all types of barriers, including attitudinal and systemic; embracing flexibility and empathy; and underscores the importance of

involving people with lived experience in decision-making (Byng & Duchan, 2005; Tregaskis, 2002; Doyle, 2020).

Interviews and consultations with key informants, people with lived experience, and other project stakeholders revealed that while a social model of disability is the foundation of federal and provincial accessibility legislation, it is not a mainstream concept with employers and as a result should not be taken for granted as common knowledge:

“It's so strange because the social model of disability is something that's been around for so long... then you step outside of the disability world and... you have to explain these ideas again from the ground up... Once people hear it, they're really open and receptive to it. But this is just not an idea that's in mainstream society... exposing people to these ideas and usually once they're close to the idea, it's not a hard sell and they've honestly never thought about it before.” (Interview 10)

A lack of understanding of how barriers are socially constructed can have negative consequences on people with disabilities, as employers continue to implement policies and processes that are more reflective of a medical model of disability as one that holds that “a person’s functional limitations (impairments) are the root cause of any disadvantages experienced and these disadvantages can therefore only be rectified by treatment or cure” (Crow, 1996). A medical model of disability generates assumptions about what counts as “normal” (Perju, 2011). It narrows the focus of accessibility and inclusion efforts to physical adaptations or accommodations for the individual, often shifting responsibility back to the individual to produce a justification or medical “proof” that such an adjustment is required. Research findings emphasized how the medical model of disability persists in organizations and its negative impact on employees with disabilities:

“I have a personally a quite a big issue with the way that disability management currently functions in organizations. It relies on medical documentation [which] I think really take away from our opportunity to be inclusive and accessible employers... the message that you know, ‘I have to prove that I need something out of the ordinary. And then you're going to decide whether or not you grant it to me’... that I think it is a big issue, especially when we think about employment.” (Interview 3)

Understanding a social model of disability is required to orient employers to the work of addressing barriers at all stages of the employment lifecycle. Research interviews highlighted that organizations often think about accessibility only as it pertains to barriers in the built environment, or that disability becomes reduced to an accommodations policy requiring medical documentation to be accessed and deployed. However, a social model of disability allows an organization to understand, identify, and address all forms of barriers that employees encounter. For example, one employer integrated a social model of disability into their leadership toolkit, which advises managers to focus on the supports employees need as opposed to what the disability is. Through this and other examples, employers described how broadening an understanding of accessibility through a social model allows for a deeper contribution to organizational commitment and planning across the organization:

“The realization of how far accessibility goes, like how many aspects of the organization it touches more than the [built environment]. Many of the people that are supporting the project initially, they thought, ‘I don't know if there is a lot they have to contribute,’ but then realize that because this could be so wide, there might be some areas where they can share practices that are that are related [and] can improve accessibility.” (Interview 25)

THE FOUR PILLARS: KEY THEMES

The following discussion consolidates research findings according to key themes. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and consultation notes was juxtaposed against pertinent findings in the literature review and environmental scan. During the coding and analysis of transcripts, an inductive approach was used. Themes reflect research findings on employer capacity to adopt more accessible and inclusive approaches to hiring people with disabilities as well as their reflections on promising practices, key factors to success, and how employment standards might impact employer behaviour.

COMMITMENT

Under the Four Pillars model, a clearly expressed commitment to the accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities serves as the basis for subsequent actions. The pillar focuses on organizational leadership, responsibilities, and engagement of key stakeholders to establish goals, identify priorities, and plan for change. Among the employers interviewed for this project, most priorities and actions were focused within the commitment pillar. Examples included undertaking a comprehensive review of practices to inform an accessibility plan, engaging with

key internal stakeholders (e.g., organizational leadership, unions, hiring managers), and establishing awareness/initial buy-in for DEI goals.

Planning and priorities

Literature review findings emphasized that a strategic plan helps to bridge intention and action, by outlining how the organization can approach different aspects of disability inclusion policies, and to establish measurable goals to track progress (Curtis & Scott, 2004). These plans can also serve as a tool to build awareness of how accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities provides long-term benefits to organizations, which include improved employee morale, increased profitability, and enhanced public opinion (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012).

Many of employers were in the process of undertaking a broader organizational assessment of barriers as part of a broader accessibility planning exercise, whether directly motivated by requirements under the *Accessible Canada Act*, or indirectly in anticipation of provincial requirements. Accessibility planning practices included the systemic review of products, systems, and processes to identify barriers and look for opportunities to address them, which also included evaluating procurement of technology and software from an accessibility perspective.

Employer Spotlight: Canadian Western Bank’s Multi-Year Accessibility Plan

The CWB has established a “Multi-Year Accessibility Plan,” which is reviewed every five years. The practices embedded in the plan are broken down into Training; Information & Communications; and Employment, and include:

Training: employees receive training on accessibility standards and the Human Rights Code, which is provided to all new employees and to all employees every two years or as policies change.

Information & Communications: CWB websites and website content conforms with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0, Level AA).

Employment: use of alternative processes and assistive technologies for recruitment, training, and employee development. Applicants are informed of available accommodations and offers of employment confirm policies for accommodations. Employees are informed of policies to support employees with disabilities and individual accommodation plans and return-to-work policies are in place.

Learn more at: www.cwbank.com/-/media/cwbgroup/documents/Multi-Year-Plan.pdf

Several employers noted that at this stage, their focus was on initial assessment of barriers, fostering a greater awareness of accessibility, and preparing to consult with employees. Some employers noted that their accessibility planning required a comprehensive gap analysis to review processes, assess and audit systems and processes, consult with employees and internal stakeholders, and ultimately identify priorities for an accessibility plan in alignment with federal or provincial accessibility planning requirements. Other employers have contracted external consultants to support the development of their accessibility plans.

Resource commitment

Under the Commitment pillar, a key action is “financial commitment in the form of resources, headcount and training budget for DEI implementation.” However, research interviews observed both the challenges of accessing organizational resources to advance DEI goals, as well as the overall competing priorities of the organization. For interviewees not in specialized DEI roles, driving accessibility and inclusion was either a personal priority or one of many competing priorities, but advanced “off the side of their desk.” Even in instances where the employer had assigned responsibility to a DEI committee or leadership, research interviews noted that the lack of resourcing and expertise was an ongoing challenge:

“The ongoing challenge is just having the resourcing and sometimes the expertise because we're doing this, you know, self-driven. So just wanting to make sure that we're doing it right, but mostly resourcing. That, I would say that's our biggest challenge. I think we have support... We've had the buy in from leaders. It's more resourcing focused, quite honestly.” (Interview 26)

Several employers interviewed pointed to the challenges of advancing DEI initiatives in the workplace when responsibility fell primarily to HR teams. Some noted that while it may be common in large, public-sector organizations to have DEI specialists, these were not typical of all sectors. Employers noted that HR departments have experienced unprecedented pressure over the last several years, not only in terms of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic from a health and safety perspective, but also from the volatility experienced in the labour market and ongoing workplace challenges of vaccine mandates, hybrid work, and voluntary retirements. They noted that such pressures have led to a high degree of turnover in their own HR staff, contributing to challenges in maintaining focus on DEI priorities. Other research findings confirmed that small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) can encounter challenges related to limited in-house HR capacity, which can result in constraints with recruitment, hiring and onboarding, while larger organizations may face different challenges, such as competing priorities at the corporate and local levels (CRWDP, McMaster, & IWH, 2022).

While research interviews noted challenges with respect to – and importance of – resourcing, they also acknowledged that accessibility and inclusion should be a priority regardless. For individuals that occupied specialized DEI roles in their organization, they also noted that these roles were often limited to a small number of individuals and that part of their role was to engage others in the organization to build awareness and buy-in for DEI priorities. Many interviewees noted the challenges associated with engaging leadership on a continuous basis, beyond some of the initial forms of executive-level sponsorship and communication of DEI initiatives. Feedback highlighted that the Four Pillars framework – conceived largely by and for

HR professionals focusing on recruitment – may have placed an overreliance on these roles to advance DEI in their organizations when they were stretched thin:

“What I really remember thinking is, wow, a lot of this is focused on HR or within HR ... our HR team was stretched pretty thin at that time... When we were considering these recommendations, it was like, ‘Oh, we have to tap on their shoulder quite a bit to implement probably [the] majority of these.’”

(Interview 23)

Shared responsibility and accountability

The pressures experienced by employers highlights the significant challenges encountered when organizations understand DEI work to be the sole responsibility of leaders or specialists, with no shared responsibility or accountability for this work (Tharakan & Woods, 2021). As a result, while organizations create a commitment to diversity through these designated roles (and who are often occupied by people with lived experience), the organization does not go beyond the creation of the role to address DEI within the organization. In other words, while specialized positions provide organizational evidence of a commitment to diversity, it may end there; often overshadowing the important, collective responsibility to advance equity and inclusion across the organization (Ahmed, 2012).

Throughout this project, the research team noted the pressures on employers responsible for DEI work. The term “diversity fatigue” or “DEI fatigue” has emerged to convey feelings of frustration, isolation, and even demoralization that people doing the daily work of building more equitable workspaces experience (Laing, 2022). Research interviews confirmed these personnel are experiencing burn out, facing competing priorities, and frequently lack of access to both senior decision-makers as well as operational units on the ground necessary for progress. Emerging evidence also notes that while DEI strategies have become more widely implemented in the last several years, they are rarely demonstrating meaningful progress or lack ways to measure progress altogether (Hue, 2022; Subramaniam et al., 2021).

To combat “DEI fatigue”, research highlights the importance of shared responsibility and accountability for DEI priorities by aligning them with corporate strategy, integrating DEI initiatives into everyday workflow, integrating data and measurement to track progress, and integrating DEI into leaders’ performance evaluation and compensation (Willingham, 2022). This is a practice that one employer is developing, in that a DEI goal is encouraged as part of annual performance appraisals within the organization. Shared accountability with clear measures not only establishes trust across an organization but can also contribute to employee

engagement and collaboration on better organizational policies and practices by addressing employees' needs (Khan et al., 2019).

Research findings underscored that shared accountability and serious measurement were necessary for ongoing dialogue on inclusion and for moving from intention to action. Other promising practices included having DEI professionals report directly into senior leadership, rather than be in HR departments/reporting structures, and integrating DEI specialists into a whole-of-organization approach to DEI goals that is aligned with overall organizational goals:

“I would say my philosophy around this work is that if we have the buy-in, I shouldn't need a huge team, right, because [DEI] should be embedded within the business... how does it help support the business to have [that] lens?”
(Interview 22)

Internal stakeholder engagement

To ensure that DEI spans all levels of the organization, the Commitment pillar focuses on internal stakeholder engagement, including formal engagement and support with unions, if applicable, as well as engagement with employees, focusing on employees with lived experience.

Union engagement

Literature review findings noted that having union support for employees with disabilities can be an important resource for problem-solving and ensuring that worker rights are protected (Small, de Boer, & Swab, 2021). Unions can play an important role in advancing disability rights in the workplace: they negotiate health, supports, and disability leave benefits for their members; advocate for accessible working conditions on behalf of their members with disabilities; and can play a key role in occupational health and safety audits (Canadian Labour Congress, 2021).

Notwithstanding these contributions to workplace inclusion, some project stakeholders raised concerns that employers encountered challenges in implementing more flexible recruitment and retention strategies for people with disabilities in unionized environments. Among the concerns registered were constraints on job classification and posting rules, which was perceived to limit flexibility to tailor job roles to people with disabilities' strengths and needs. Some project stakeholders also raised concerns that union seniority layoff provisions in collective agreements (i.e., when a more senior employee displaces a junior employee; also known as 'bumping' provisions) disadvantaged people with disabilities in a scenario characterized as “last in, first out”.

A review of the research literature found that concerns regarding equity-deserving groups in unionized workplaces disproportionately affected by layoffs are unfounded (Singh & Reid, 1998). Both the Supreme Court of Canada and Canadian human rights tribunals have upheld the importance for employers' duty to accommodate *and* employees' collective bargaining rights, where conflicts may need to be arbitrated on a case-by-case basis (Swinton, 1995; Lynk, 1999; Neumayer, 2003). Research also suggests that unionized workplaces may offer other protections for equity-deserving groups, including mechanisms to reduce the likelihood of layoffs, or other ways to protect members with less seniority, such as work-sharing (Singh & Reid, 1998). Ultimately, the dynamics between protecting both workers' rights to seniority and to anti-discrimination of people with disabilities underscore the importance of unions and employers collaborating on ways to be inclusive of equity-deserving groups that may have less seniority (Swinton, 1995).

To further understand how unions can be engaged in the employer's commitment to disability inclusion, the research team undertook consultations with representatives from two national union organizations, and with three subject matter experts who had experience working with unions in the development of their organizations' DEI strategies. All underscored the importance of engaging union representatives early in the process, creating a joint vision for workplace inclusion and ensuring union leadership and management worked towards problem-solving and priority-setting, instead of "rubber stamping" DEI initiatives. Consultations with union representatives noted that there were existing promising practices between employers and unions advancing DEI – especially in the public sector – where there are examples of employee engagement, consultation, and representation on these issues. Finally, consultations underscored the importance of accountability and noted that whether at the policy level or the organizational level, accessibility was often approached as a complaint-driven or reactive process, rather than a proactive process of identifying and removing barriers.

Resource Spotlight: Doing Things Differently: A Disability Rights at Work Handbook by the Canadian Labour Congress

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) handbook provides information on Duty to Accommodate, and an Accessibility Checklist for meetings and events that unions and staff can reference.

The guide also includes information on:

- Understanding Disability
- History of Unions in the Fight for Disability Rights in Canada
- Rights of Workers with Disabilities in Canada
- Defending Disability Rights at Work: The Duty to Accommodate; and Building a Disability Inclusive Union

Learn more at: <https://canadianlabour.ca/doing-things-differently-guide/>

Interviews with employers emphasized several promising practices regarding engaging unions in advancing DEI strategies, noting that collaboration with unions have led to some adjustments and promising practices to ensure more diversity in job applications. One employer considered their work and engagement with their union to find a way to bridge an internship for people with disabilities into a full-time role to be a key success of their DEI work to date. In this example, collaboration and shared goals allowed both the employer and the union to navigate the job evaluation and posting system, and the union helped to build awareness on the agreement with their membership.

Employee engagement

The meaningful inclusion of people with lived experience in the decision-making process is integral to creating accessible and inclusive workplaces, captured by the motto used by disability justice movement, “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 1998) and a core principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as well as the *Accessible Canada Act*.¹ Engagement of employees with lived experience is important across the Four Pillars framework, but especially within the Commitment pillar to establish DEI vision, goals, and priorities, and contribution to ongoing decision-making.

As set out in the Commitment pillar, one way to engage people with lived experience is through Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). Although ERGs can take on different mandates and roles within an organization, they are generally composed of employee volunteers that provide a forum for people with lived experience to have a voice on organizational matters that impact them directly. The benefits of these groups are well-known, including contributing to increased employee engagement and retention, as well as contributing to DEI awareness and training efforts of the organization (Bonaccio et al., 2020).

Research findings underscored important considerations when establishing ERGs. Research interviews noted that establishing an ERG was dependent on employee trust and comfort identifying themselves as living with a disability at work, as well as the emotional labour involved in ERG members having responsibility to move accessibility priorities forward. Some interviews noted low take-up on calls for volunteers or members coming forward to establish ERGs. Others noted that ERGs required organizational resources and capacity to ensure that

¹ The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes that “persons with disabilities should have the opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making processes about policies and programmes, including those directly concerning them.” See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>.

The Accessible Canada Act provides that the Act is to be carried out in accordance with several principles, which include: “persons with disabilities must be involved in the development and design of laws, policies, programs, services and structures.” See <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/a-0.6/page-1.html#h-1153434>.

members are supported. Interviews suggested that while employers are often advised to hold up ERGs as a promising practice, there is a lack of guidance on how the ERG is going to be executed. Considerations must be given to ERG structure, deliverables, and accountability from senior management, as well as how to engage employees within complex organizational structures or throughout a large and distributed workforce.

Interviews identified important success factors when establishing ERGs. These included clear terms of reference and clear lines of accountability for ERG work and contributions; compensation for ERG chairs (which may also include union time release negotiations); and organizational support – either from dedicated staff or from senior management:

“We came up with a new framework. We also now compensate our chairs... it is being really clear about roles and accountability... role clarity is the number one thing that supports psychological well-being... when you have these employee-led groups or organizational-led groups, it is really good to have clarity on their role, their purpose, their authority, the power they have... [also] having that dedicated person to support is helpful.” (Interview 24)

A successful ERG model also requires the active participation of senior management, highlighting the importance of shared responsibility and accountability to advance accessibility and inclusion priorities that reflect employees’ lived experience:

“I think that’s a lot of why [the ERG] was so successful. So, there’s been a lot of talks between us and the executive team... Our side has the lived experience, our side has the coaching and the ability to connect those who come in with disabilities... and then the executive team has been fantastic in sort of re-tooling everything.” (Interview 4)

Beyond ERGs, employers also noted promising practices that ensure employees are part of the decision-making process. For example, one employer established a DEI Taskforce composed of employees from across the organization, including front line staff and Managers and Directors. Research findings also highlighted the importance of ensuring that while people with lived experiences are included in decision-making processes, it is not up to people with disabilities alone to drive change within their organizations or educate their peers. Engagement of employees with lived experience needs to be balanced with a shared responsibility to become educated and contribute to accessibility and inclusion within the workplace:

“I’m trying to figure out a balance because I don’t want to put all the labour and the invisible burden on people with disabilit[ies] to talk about their lived experiences. So, I’m bringing all the experts in the room, but I don’t want the experts to be making decisions without the input of people who are going to be impacted by [those decisions].” (Interview 3)

READINESS

According to a study of disability inclusion factors, preparedness was the most predictive of increasing the employment of people with disabilities (Iwanaga et al., 2021). Overall lack of preparedness or knowledge to accommodate a person with a disability can be an issue (Shahin et al., 2020) and lack of readiness and planning can have negative impacts on all employees, as organizations may not have the resources and skills to overcome difficult or unexpected situations (von Schrader et al., 2014).

Under the Four Pillars framework, the pillar of Readiness includes actions that focus on preparations required to hire inclusively: enacting a change management process to identify and address barriers in the organization’s hiring practices; training and education to support an organizational culture of inclusion; and reviewing and modifying key components of the recruitment and hiring process to remove barriers (e.g., reviewing and modifying application, screening, interviewing processes and guides, and other policies and practices). Overall, employers appreciated the Readiness pillar to ensure they felt confident in moving forward with their DEI goals:

“Going back to... the readiness... ‘Do we have the environment for people with disabilities to come in? And are they going to stay?’ ... And really focusing on our environment, because when we do that, we make the environment better for everybody, not just bringing in a person with disability, right?” (Interview 22)

Diversity benchmarking and disclosure

In the Four Pillars framework, one action under Readiness is “we have collected employee data to benchmark our current representation of diversity.” Several employers noted the challenges they experienced in establishing baseline measures: on the one hand, they recognized that a culture of inclusion and trust was a necessary pre-condition for employees to feel comfortable in disclosing a disability, even in an anonymous survey. On the other hand, they noted challenges in creating a

disability-inclusive culture without being able to point to the current representation of people with disabilities in their organizations and having key data to understand where they are and where they want to go:

“We had a lot of pushback in the first couple of iterations of our employee surveys on asking the [demographic] questions. A lot of people expressed concerns about, ‘Is that information going to be held confidential or is it private? Could it be held against me?’ ... There are people who are reluctant to self-identify because, you know, lived experience... That’s another example of where a government mandate could actually help with us being able to collect that data and have a better sense of how we’re doing and metrics to compare against.” (Interview 26)

In most cases, the disclosure of a disability is a highly personal decision. Employees are not required to disclose a disability to an employer unless it interferes with the person’s ability to carry out an essential function of the job. In one report, employees with disabilities feared that disclosing would lead to outcomes such as retaliation, slower progression, and less meaningful roles (Accenture, 2020).

The decision to self-identify or disclose a disability at work is often influenced by employees’ perceptions of disability inclusion in the workplace (Jans et al., 2012). Employers must be clear about how they are collecting and using employee information, including protection of privacy and personal identifiers (Von Shrader & Bruyère, 2014). In addition, research suggests that inclusive work environments positively contribute to mandated or voluntary measurement processes. The degree to which workplace inclusion is evident is a key variable that can improve reactions to requests for self-identification and measurement (Santuzzi et al., 2022).

Research interviews recognized that establishing a trusting environment in which employees feel safe to disclose requires that the organization implement other measures that demonstrate how the employer is moving forward with disability inclusion:

“I think it is really building that trust amongst our employees... Right now... we have so many new people... People don’t really feel that they can trust the organization to come forward [to disclose] a disability, or that we actually walk the talk... they need to see things in action. So, it’s building that connection with our employees, I think.” (Interview 21)

Interviews also noted that approaching measurement as a precondition of Readiness may limit organizations' capacity to foster a culture of inclusion necessary for disclosure to occur. Some suggested that rather than a "point in time" exercise, creating opportunities for confidential, positive, and voluntary self-disclosure for all employees was equally required across the pillars of Commitment, Recruitment and Retention.

Benchmarking processes need to be tied to building overall awareness and support for DEI vision and goals, as well transparency, monitoring progress, and sharing lessons learned through a process of continuous improvement. As an alternative to employee surveys, one employer noted that their organization allows employees to create a profile that recognizes disability as one aspect of an employee's intersectional identity. The profile system was also supported by a communications campaign to outline how employee data would be used and the benefits of self-identification, which were key factors in employee uptake.

Resource Spotlight: Balancing Employee Privacy and Disclosure (Presidents Group)

Presidents Group is committed to improving the representation of people with disabilities in the workplace. Through its Pledge to Measure initiative, it recognizes that the increase in self-identification of a disability is due to organizations creating a safe space for self-disclosure. Its resources for employers to balance employee privacy and disclosure highlight the following practices:

1. Ask the person
2. Consider what information is relevant to the role
3. Consider how you share information about all your employees
4. Demonstrate the benefits of disclosure

The resource also stresses that disclosure is a personal choice and is up to the person to decide. Presidents Group's Spotlight on Disability in the Workplace video series showcases employee and employer experiences of disclosure.

Learn more at: <https://accessibleemployers.ca/resource/employee-privacy-and-disclosure/>

Reviewing organizational policies and procedures

The Readiness pillar highlights several actions to review organizational policies and procedures, including barriers in the recruitment and hiring process (e.g., job descriptions, careers page, application process, testing, and interviews), employee benefits and assistance programs, and establishing a process to reassess policies and practices on an annual basis. Findings from the literature review emphasized that workplace policies may not address the needs of people with disabilities, which include but are not limited to fitness assessments, return-to-work schemes, sick leave, and long-term job security benefits (Small, de Boer, & Swab, 2021; Shahin et al., 2020). For example, beneficial workplace policies for people with disabilities can include more comprehensive sick and disability leave benefits, allowing time off while still make it possible to

return to work, flexible or extra leave, and income support (Small, de Boer, & Swab, 2021). Findings also emphasized that importance of employers consulting with employees with disabilities and experts when reviewing or creating policies (The Inclusive Workplace, 2019; Ford Foundation, 2021).

The importance of having a more comprehensive review of organizational policies and procedures beyond hiring was also echoed in interviews with experts who work with employers. They noted that a “baseline of supports” must exist prior to engaging in hiring people with disabilities. While that baseline included addressing physical accessibility and ensuring employee accommodations were in place, they also noted disability inclusion in the workplace required a more comprehensive review of policies and procedures for flexibility:

“I think doing some of the baseline accessibility is around that flexibility... I don't think that someone should need to disclose a disability just to be able to attend a physio appointment a couple of times a week during work... just be accepting that some people have things that come up in their life and employers should be able to be accommodating towards that.” (Interview 5)

Employers also highlighted that an important aspect of preparedness is reviewing employee health, benefit, and pension programs in consultation with employee equity groups. Some employers noted those recent augmentations to employee benefits, focusing on mental health, were the result of employee consultations, recognizing that employees from equity-deserving groups may have higher mental health needs than others. Other employers were creating wellness benefits to ensure that all employees can perform at their potential.

Resource Spotlight: Disability Inclusion Employment Best Practices (Disability:IN)

Disability:IN identifies best practices that enable a culture of inclusion that promotes increased self-identification, belonging, and innovation. These include the following employment practices that can be reviewed for barriers:

Ensuring employee benefits are available for both full-time and part-time employees, with adequate disability coverage and supports, such as an Employee Assistance Program.

Creating inclusive talent acquisition practices, including targeting job seekers with disabilities, and ensuring recruiters have accessible and inclusive interviewing techniques and assessments.

Developing talent and creating customized programs focused on employees with disabilities, such as inclusive professional development platforms, mentoring opportunities, and expanding promotion opportunities for employees with disabilities.

Establishing policies and implementing programs to provide accommodations, access inclusive technology and information, and creating an accessible workplace environment.

Learn more at: <https://disabilityin-bulk.s3.amazonaws.com/2021/Disability+Inclusion+Employment+Best+Practices+Final508.pdf>

Employee training

Attitudes in the workplace often represent the most significant barrier for disability inclusion and negatively impact outcomes for people with disabilities (Baker et al., 2018). Negative stereotypes about people with disabilities, concerns about the costs of accommodations, and the fear of legal liability are common sources of misconception and bias. While such concerns have been dispelled with evidence-based responses demonstrating costs of accommodations to be low and perceived legal issues to be unfounded (Bonaccio et al., 2020), interviews highlighted that employers are often making decisions based on such faulty assumptions and argued for the importance of employer education in this context.

One of the reasons that faulty assumptions regarding employers' concerns around risk, the costs of accommodations, and work-related abilities of people with disabilities may be the unconscious bias regarding ability, which may lead to systemic barriers and discrimination of people with disabilities (Murphy et al., 2018). Unconscious or implicit bias refers to the ways that social behaviour is largely influenced by unconscious associations and judgements. As these processes are often learned and recalled automatically, it makes them difficult to identify, but even more necessary to do so and advocate for change (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995, 2016). Addressing unconscious bias goes together with embracing a social model of disability. The continued use of the medical model, which frames individuals' "lack of ability" or requesting something "out of the ordinary" may influence continued misperceptions and negative associations concerning disability management and productivity (Bonaccio et al., 2020).

Diversity and inclusion training that addresses bias can help to increase understanding and comfort around people with disabilities amongst all employees (Lindsay et al., 2022) and is also considered necessary to increase awareness of discriminatory practices (IWH, 2022; AbleTo, 2020). However, interviews highlighted that such training is often ineffective unless it is meaningfully applied in the day-to-day actions of employees. Some research interviews noted that organizations can treat training as a "silver bullet" that does little to create meaningful change:

“I’m not a huge fan of training because I think we all go to that place of saying... ‘Oh, I will be so more inclusive if I just have training.’ ... it makes us feel good. We bring somebody in, we maybe learn a little bit, but it doesn’t move anything, right? And so we need [a] shared language that will continue.” (Interview 22)

Research interviews also explored challenges with respect to training employees and engaging in meaningful ways to address unconscious bias. Employers expressed that employee turnover has made it difficult to establish a shared organizational level of understanding on DEI, especially evident with hiring managers and direct supervisors. Some conveyed that unconscious bias training may itself be misinterpreted or viewed with suspicion or employee resistance (i.e., the extent to which employees feel comfortable with the employer addressing employee beliefs). Others noted that organizations that have a distributed or seasonal workforce cannot leverage tools like an employee intranet or e-learning resources to deepen understanding:

“Accessing, offering learning for people that are always outside on the road, they are not sitting in front of a computer... regular ways of communication, such as emails or posting articles [on the organization’s intranet], that is not something that they are looking at every day. This is definitely a challenge: finding tactics or initiatives that are going to reach the bulk of our employees.” (Interview 25)

The research literature has also pointed to the importance of addressing the application of anti-bias training, noting that there are gaps in translating awareness into action. These include lack of any measurement of training outcomes or impact, competing organizational priorities and values, and the lack of addressing interpersonal communications (Hagiwara et al., 2020). To address these challenges, several practices were identified in the research. Interviews suggested incorporating DEI values into an employee code of conduct; providing workplace ‘challenges’ to employees to incorporate DEI practices into everyday interactions; and creating opportunities for team reflection:

“One [organization] that has done a lot of really great work... They don't just do a workshop on unconscious bias. They actually work. At the beginning of meetings, [they will] have discussions about ‘what kind of biases might I be bringing to this context?’ So, they're really applying the learning and addressing those attitudinal or unconscious bias pieces that more of the culture and the relational barriers that come up. That's very advanced in my mind... it's also about giving people the freedom to really internalize the framework or get at the less tangible pieces that are hard to call anyone on and know that they will have issues with.” (Interview 1)

RECRUITMENT

It is becoming well-understood that inclusive hiring makes businesses stronger, more productive, more innovative, more stable, and safer (The Inclusive Workplace, 2019). Despite recognizing the business advantage of hiring people with disabilities, studies of Canadian employers note that they fail to do so because they do not know how to recruit people with disabilities or often have difficulty finding qualified applicants for their openings (Brisbois, 2014). Employers are often unaware of how certain recruitment practices can exclude people with disabilities who may be otherwise qualified for the position, which include people who are neurodiverse. Barriers not only exist in the physical environment but can be experienced in assessment and screening practices as well (Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2012). Employers who wish to hire inclusively need to ensure there are policies and practices in place throughout the recruitment and hiring process – from clarifying work tasks in the job description, offering flexible work options, and exploring accessible application forms and pre-employment tests (AbleTo, 2020).

In practice, the Recruitment pillar addresses key steps in the recruitment process from actively targeting advertised positions to people with disabilities, working with community partners and service organizations to seek out candidates, and addressing barriers within the application, screening, and interviewing process.

Accessible recruitment

Findings from the literature review confirmed that employers should review recruitment practices and processes for a range of barriers. Job descriptions/roles should be focused on the required skills to perform the job successfully. Employers should review and clarify what skills, previous experiences, and knowledge is required to be successful in the role in question (CCRW, n.d.). Guidance for employers in creating accessible job advertisements ranges from using

barrier-free, plain language to encourage all qualified candidates to apply, providing job descriptions in multiple, accessible formats (e.g., braille, large print, audio, etc.), posting job openings outside of traditional platforms, such as on social media, working with local disability organizations, and advertising within disability related publications, websites, and job fairs (CCRW, n.d., AbleTo, 2020; Inclusive Futures, n.d.). Websites and online applications should also be reviewed for accessibility (Fielden et al., 2020).

Employers had varied experience recruiting candidates with disabilities. While some employers' organizations were in the early stages of accessible and inclusive planning, some with more inclusive recruitment practices observed the importance of not only outlining the availability of accommodations in job ads and the applications process, but also pointing to larger DEI values and priorities of the organization:

“We put at the top of all our postings that really just calls it all out... ‘Whoever you are, whatever you bring, we want it all’... when I first saw it... I was like, wow, that’s bold. But at the same time, it’s like, yeah, you are absolutely what we want... We’ve gotten a lot of feedback on it, one individual, once she was hired, she’s neurodiverse, wrote ‘The only reason I applied was because of that job posting... I want an organization is going to value the fact that I’m on the spectrum and clearly do because you put it at the top of a job posting.’” (Interview 20)

Employer Spotlight: Insurance Corporation of British Columbia

In their job postings, the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia asks about adjustments upfront, offers flexible working arrangements and includes statements regarding their inclusive work environment. These statements include:

Adjustments: “We welcome applications from all qualified job seekers. If you are a job seeker with a disability, please let us know as adjustments can be made to help support you in delivering your best performance. We look forward to discussing what options we can provide for your unique needs.”

Flexible Working Arrangements: “We offer flexible working arrangements as we continue to support our employees in balancing their career and personal commitments including a combination of in-office and remote work on a weekly basis.”

Engaging Culture: “We promote and inclusive and diverse work environment.”

Learn more at: <https://www.icbc.com/about-icbc/careers/Pages/default.aspx>

Job application processes often include barriers for people with disabilities that go undetected by employers. For example, neurodiverse candidates benefit from the use of clear, concrete language that avoids jargon and ambiguity, and uses specific examples (The Inclusive Workplace, 2019; Sinneave Family Foundation, 2021). Beyond ensuring that online job application formats are accessible online (with alternative formats provided), standardized formats often discourage or screen out applications when they are too narrow or restrictive (The Inclusive Workplace, 2019). Candidates may have gaps in their employment history or have limited paid employment experiences, but relevant volunteer or educational experiences (MHCC, 2019; The Inclusive Workplace, 2019). Some guidance encourages employers to remove any mandatory fields in their online application process (The Inclusive Workplace, 2019) or rethink the application process entirely. For example, by providing some question prompts and asking candidates to respond in video format as an alternative to a cover letter and resume (Inclusive Futures, n.d.).

Standardized screening tests also often create barriers for neurodiverse individuals and do not consider diverse ways of thinking (The Inclusive Workplace, 2019; The Conference Board of Canada, 2015). If using pre-screening assessments or testing, employers should consider providing candidates with questions in advance, opportunities to provide answers in alternative formats, and ensuring other accommodations are in place from extra time to including a support person or job coach to help them complete the test (The Inclusive Workplace, 2019). Several employers highlighted that a “screen in” vs. “screen out” policy was helpful in diversifying recruitment. A “screen in” recruitment process may put greater emphasis on transferrable skills, experience, and knowledge, recognizing the candidates’ strengths and potential to be trained on the job.

Resource Spotlight: The Inclusive Workplace (Ready Willing and Able)

Beyond the job posting, there are also a number of best practices that can be used to improve the accessibility of an online job application system.

These can include:

- Including clear instructions for search fields and using drop down menus to make it clearer to candidates what jobs are available.
- Clearly defining password requirements when asking candidate to create an account, which can reduce frustrations that could prevent the right candidate from applying.
- Providing multiple ways for candidates to apply for a job, such as uploading resume vs. entering the information manually.
- Including a progress bar or a visual depiction of where the applicant is in the application process, which can help to reduce the number of people who abandon the application.
- Including questions that allow an applicant to answer fully and accurately, e.g., space for applicants to add comments or explain their selections.

Learn more at: <https://www.theinclusiveworkplace.ca/en/hire-inclusively>

Interview findings also surfaced examples of building transparency and accountability in the hiring process. In one organization, a formal challenge mechanism was put in place for all hiring decisions, where a hiring manager had to formally describe the steps taken to support the organization’s goals for hiring diverse talent. Mechanisms for transparency and accountability were especially important in large organizations where managers may exercise a large degree of discretion in hiring decisions:

“[Hiring managers] need to know that they're going to get challenged if they keep getting great candidates that happen to have disabilities and people that have been brave enough to share that in the recruitment process. And then they go with the person that they think doesn't have a disability. They need to be held to account for that. They need to know that someone's going to challenge that.” (Interview 1)

Accessible interviewing

Many people with disabilities are unwilling to disclose or request accommodations or adjustments within the recruitment process due to fear of discrimination (Fielden et al., 2020). When planning an interview, guidance for employers suggests reviewing interview instructions for clear and explicit language, offering to help the candidate prepare for the interview in advance, providing questions or an itinerary so that candidates can feel prepared for the discussion, and providing all candidates with a checklist of available interview adjustments that they may choose from (Sinneave Family Foundation, 2021; The Inclusive Workplace, 2019).

For many candidates, the interview experience can provoke anxiety, whether based on past negative experiences and discrimination, or in panel interviews that may feel intimidating. For neurodiverse candidates, barriers are encountered when employers do not attend to the sensory environment, where harsh lighting or noise can also be a barrier to performing well. Literature also notes that behaviour-based interviews are not conducive to demonstrating skills and experience, especially among neurodiverse candidates (Patton, 2019; The Inclusive Workplace, 2019; Sinneave Family Foundations, 2021). Alternatives to behaviour-based interviews include asking clear, specific questions instead of hypothetical or abstract ones (e.g., ‘tell me one or two things you are good at that will help you in this job’ instead of ‘what are your strengths’); using the candidate’s resume to build questions; and avoiding double-barreled questions (The Inclusive Workplace, 2019; Sinneave Family Foundation, 2021).

Literature review findings also underscored alternatives to the traditional boardroom interview. Alternatives include a walking interview where the employer introduces the candidate to the workplace/surroundings and learns about the candidate at the same time, or a demonstration or

working interview where the candidate can perform essential job-related tasks or assignments. These formats may provide a better fit for candidates who may interpret things literally, or those with a different communication or interaction style, where reading body language and making eye contact is difficult (The Inclusive Workplace, 2019; Sinneave Family Foundation, 2021).

Given the rise of remote and hybrid work, employers should also consider how online platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Zoom) may not be adequate in addressing communications needs. Guidance suggests ensuring sign language interpreters and/or captionists have access to the platform; a dry erase board, writing tablet, or other communication feature is on-hand; and testing accommodations/adjustments with the candidate in advance to ensure communication is working for them (Murad, 2020).

Resource Spotlight: Ensuring Accessible Digital Interviews (PEAT)

Digital interviews have the potential to increase accessibility, allowing the applicant to interview from an environment that already meets their needs. Digital interviews can also be more personal than a phone interview, as well as being more cost-effective than in-person interviews that require the applicant to travel.

However, digital interviews can also present accessibility challenges, requiring some thought to ensure inclusivity and fairness:

- Lag time – ensure there is plenty of time for digital interviews and be mindful of the impact of lag time.
- Internet connectivity issues – be mindful of the impact of spotty Internet and offer alternative interview methods for those who may prefer them.
- Poor lighting – ensure you, as the interviewer, are facing a light source and are not backlit.
- Accommodations – Work with applicants who request reasonable accommodations and allow plenty of time for the interview.
- Captioning – Consider providing real time captioning for applicants with hearing impairments.

Learn more at: <https://www.peatworks.org/digital-accessibility-toolkits/talentworks/make-your-erecruiting-tools-accessible/talent-sourcing/pre-employment-testing/ensuring-accessible-digital-interviews/>

Some promising interview practices used by employers engaged in the project include working with a disability serving organization to tailor the interview process to the candidate; using core-value based interviews (i.e., where questions include the company values on accessibility and inclusion); and consulting with the organization’s ERG on barriers in the interview process. As one employer noted, “conventional interviewing will get you conventional employees.”

Alternative pathways into employment

A disability confident organization is one with the knowledge and skills required to work effectively with people with disabilities, to understand and implement workplace adjustments,

and to create inclusive workplaces (Lindsay et al., 2019). As one interview noted, bad employment experiences or poor candidate fit leads to both jaded employers and job seekers and can do “more harm than good.” One of the most effective ways of increasing disability confidence across all levels is through positive experiences working with people with disability, often through alternative pathways to employment such as internships (Murfitt et al., 2018).

Since recruitment can still be viewed amongst employers as too much of a “high risk” approach to build disability confidence, literature review findings also surfaced other ways organizations can approach this process, through volunteering, mentoring, and internship programs (Murfitt et al., 2018). Alternative pathways to employment that are inclusive of people with disabilities have unique advantages of building an employer’s disability inclusion capacity, while also ensuring that the position is meeting the workforce needs of the employer. Supported internship and workplace programs also provide benefits for people with disabilities to gain employment experience and skills, as well as to develop confidence and feel socially included (Hanson et al., 2021).

Some interviews described positive experiences for these alternative pathways. One organization’s ERG had proposed and designed a 12-week paid work placement for people with disabilities to gain work experience and potentially be placed within full-time positions. This opportunity was important for addressing the barriers that people with lived experience encounter by not having access to the same employment networks or opportunities to gain employment experience that others may have:

“We envision it as a 12-week program where [people with disabilities] can pick a department that’s on the list and train with a manager or member in that department to gain experience. And it’s even led to two of our participants landing full time jobs... I was trying to get into the [organization] five years ago, there really wasn’t anything like that. I just got lucky because I’d met somebody at a networking event.” (Interview 4)

Another employer highlighted that they experienced success working with their union to bridge an individual in an internship into a full-time role. This alternative pathway into employment provided the employer and the union to collaborate successfully because it was not subject to the standardized job evaluation and posting process, providing more flexibility to bring the candidate into the full-time role.

RETENTION

The Four Pillars framework emerged out of BC WiN’s experiences building employer capacity to recruit and hire people with disabilities and providing job-matching services to connect people with disabilities to employment. Given this orientation, the Retention pillar emphasizes ways that employers can identify and remove barriers early within the employment lifecycle to set up new employees for success. The Retention pillar outlines actions related to onboarding and learning supports (e.g., including a job coach during onboarding, incorporating different ways of learning such as task-lists or visuals for people who are neurodiverse).

Employee onboarding and support

The literature review findings underscored the importance of employee onboarding vis-à-vis employee retention. The first weeks and months of an employee’s experience are crucial for determining whether they will continue in their roles and with the organization. Several studies suggest that few employers effectively onboard employees, which influenced employees’ decision to stay with their employer (Maurer, 2015; Dable et al., 2013). A positive onboarding experience improves new hire retention by 82 per cent and increases productivity by 70 per cent (Sinneave Family Foundation, 2021).

From an accessibility and inclusion perspective, onboarding should include that agreed-upon adjustments are ready for the employee’s first day, orientation documents are in plain language and provided in alternative formats, and that the entire team is ready to welcome and support the new employee (Sinneave Family Foundation, 2022; CASE, 2021; Inclusive Futures, n.d.). Onboarding guidance for employees with disabilities also emphasizes the importance of communication, including supplementing verbal information with written communication, establishing a formal and regular check-in and feedback process, and ensuring that a variety of touchpoints are in place to ensure there are no gaps in support (CASE, 2021; Inclusive Futures, n.d.).

Research interviews noted that the Retention pillar was helping to identify consistency throughout the hiring and onboarding process, and to ensure that commitments and supports identified in the job application and interview stages were consistent with job offers and onboarding processes. Some employers noted that onboarding capacity and supports were ongoing challenges, with both hiring managers and HR teams navigating competing priorities that may limit the amount of attention paid to new employees’ needs. One employer had introduced an onboarding specialist at their organization, which ensured a more individualized approach. Another research interview highlighted promising practices of how employers can ensure that opportunities to request adjustments are incorporated into the onboarding process for all employees:

“When I started at [my job] as part of their onboarding process... they’re like coordinating to ship me all my computer equipment, they said ‘here is your standard list of technical equipment that we provide to our employees, do you require any adaptations to this list, if so let us know what you need, and we’ll provide it.’ And what was really cool, is that in most cases, I think that conversation only happens after... ‘Oh, and now you’re here. And now I have to think about buying you the stuff that you need or only get it if you ask for it’’ whereas [with this approach] there’s like an invitation to share.”
(Interview 3)

In addition to ensuring that adaptations and accommodations are tailored to individual needs and in place on the employee’s first day, research also highlighted the importance of providing employees with options to review these throughout the employee lifecycle. Research interviews highlighted the importance of having these processes centralized so that they weren’t subject to how individual managers may approach such requests or if an employee chose not to disclose to their direct supervisor. One employer’s resource guide outlines the organization’s disclosure and accommodation process. It also provides guidance to employees on what to do if they have concerns over how their manager is responding to the disclosure of a need or request. The resource guide also underscores that the employer engages in ongoing conversations around accommodations across the employee lifecycle.

The role of managers and direct supervisors

As outlined in the Readiness pillar, managers and direct supervisors play a key role in employees’ perception of an inclusive workplace. In one study, managers accounted for at least 70 per cent of variance in employee engagement scores (Beck & Harter, n.d.). Managers play a significant role in the retention of employees, where individuals are more likely to base their decision to continue in a role on their manager or direct supervisor, not on the organization or role. Managers and direct supervisors of employees with disabilities are also required to balance the employee’s confidentiality concerns while integrating the employee into team routines and dynamics (Angotta, 2013).

Employers engaged in this project conveyed that they have experienced challenges building manager DEI capacity and that inclusive competencies were not explicitly outlined as part of a manager role or as a measure of their performance. This lack of shared management capacity towards DEI can be especially challenging for employees with disabilities where they may have a progressive or inclusive manager at the early stages of their employment, but then either switch roles or a new manager is introduced with less capacity. Employers also acknowledged that

discrepancies in how managers set employee expectations can be challenging, where understandings of flexibility and support is inconsistent across work teams.

Employers also provided examples of how organizations could address manager/direct supervisor capacity. One employer noted that introducing an annual award was a way to strengthen management commitment to DEI values and goals. Another noted that their organization was introducing dedicated support to grow inclusive leadership skills:

“The turbulence we’ve had [creates] varying levels of intention and focus on that manager capability... [We’re] very focused on building a manager capability that’s focused on inclusive leadership. So that’s one of their priorities this year.” (Interview 24)

Aspects of inclusive leadership may include: interpersonal communication, including developing emotional intelligence and empathy for staff; knowledge of employer DEI goals, policies, and responsibilities, such as Duty to Accommodate; ways to address and adapt to employees’ diverse needs while responding to business needs; promoting trust and respect amongst team members by treating individuals fairly; and building team relationships and opportunities to share in decision making (Korkmaz et al., 2022; Hire for Talent, n.d.).

Retention throughout the employee lifecycle

Retention can be thought of as the systematic efforts by the employer to develop, nurture, and provide an environment that promotes employees’ decision to remain with the organization. Retention is influenced by job demands, work environment, as well as the expectations and career development needs of an increasingly diverse workforce (Coetzee et al., 2018). Findings from the literature review highlighted that organizations that have disability-inclusive hiring models tend to have more effective retention practices for people with disabilities. However, important considerations were required concerning development opportunities, ongoing feedback and opportunities for employee involvement, and alignment with work, performance, and organizational mission (Habeck et al., 2010). Specific practices, such as supporting health conditions and absence management, back to work policies, and safety and risk prevention, were also important factors for retaining people with disabilities (Habeck et al., 2010). One employer’s workplace guides and policies outline these kinds of processes for employees and what steps managers need to take, respectively, to develop return-to-work-plans with employees who have been absent from work due to a disability.

While the Retention pillar includes other actions such as putting in place career development plans for people with disabilities, celebrating DEI efforts, or sharing lessons learned, interviews noted that some of the items required consideration during the Commitment or Readiness pillars. For example, while Retention features the action “DEI is embraced throughout our organization beyond HR specialists and new leaders are trained on DEI vision, plans, and best practices,” research findings suggest that this action requires consideration at the Commitment phase and needs to go beyond leadership to create shared organizational responsibility and accountability. Other retention practices and considerations, such as employees’ long-term absences and return to work, could be further incorporated into this pillar.

Research interviews noted that there is a need to approach accessibility and inclusion throughout the employment lifecycle in a holistic way, where retention includes an environment where employees see what a career path might look like with an employer. They noted the importance of role models and mentors within the organization. Individuals in more senior positions not only play an important role in demonstrating what career progression can look like, they also can be influential in helping employees with disabilities meet their development and career progression goals.

One practice that could be explored further in the retention model was that of sponsorship – where leaders in the organization go beyond championing DEI to actively seek out, and provide opportunities for, the advancement to people with disabilities:

“[S]ponsorship is someone who is in a role [that is] going to lift you up and bring you to the table, who is going to talk about you in those circles that you may not have access to... I would like to be able to get to a point where we're mature enough to go beyond hiring. Like hiring is a huge piece, but I try to encourage people to think backwards, that we think about like recruitment, hiring, onboarding, retention, promotion and then exit, in terms of the employee lifecycle. I think if you want to retroactively amend your organization to be more flexible, you actually have to start with the people who are there and then branch out rather than just try and get a bunch of disabled folks into your organization and hope that they fit into the processes that you have right now.” (Interview 3)

Continuous improvement

While the Four Pillars has been a useful framework for engaging employers in the work of DEI with concrete steps that progress in a linear fashion, many commentators agree that such practices should be approached in the spirit of continuous improvement, with consistent

approaches to monitoring and re-evaluation that revisit practices identified in the Four Pillars in a more iterative way, with a focus on all employees.

Several employers also commented that they were taking a step back from a focus on recruitment and hiring to assess and improve their internal processes to support employees with disabilities:

“[We are shifting] the focus from our hiring practices to now considering, ‘Okay, so when we hire people, are we sure that it is a supportive environment for them?’ We now need to focus on more closely on... our internal practices.” (Interview 26)

Other research also suggests that creating a supportive and inclusive work culture requires a willingness to learn, try new ways of working, and reaching beyond one’s “comfort zone” (Lindsay et al., 2019). Interviews recognized that organizations may not know how to talk about disability openly and are afraid of trying to be more inclusive, for fear of offending some with a disability. As a result, they avoid acting altogether:

“It’s kind of [a situation of] ‘I don’t even want to go there because I’m scared of getting into trouble.’ So that is the caution that I will have, how to communicate these [accessibility practices] ... to position it as a way of improvement...” (Interview 8)

Here, interviews also recognized the importance of transparency and shared accountability so that organizations can reflect on lessons learned and make measurable, tangible progress towards DEI goals. Some commented that it was important to approach accessible and inclusive workplaces with sustainability in mind, approaching their DEI goals with a learning mindset, and not a “check box” approach.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT

Through the exploration and application of the Four Pillars framework, the research findings surfaced several ways that employers can, with guidance and investment of resources, remove barriers in recruitment and retention, with actionable and practical steps that are readily understood. The research findings provide an increased understanding of the successful strategies and approaches articulated in the Four Pillars framework that can help federally regulated employers achieve more accessible and inclusive workplaces. The findings also offer DEI practices and leadership with respect to recruiting, hiring, and retaining people with disabilities.

The research findings provide some demand-led considerations for standards development. From a demand-led perspective, addressing underlying organizational culture and environment are key components of addressing barriers in the workplace. It acknowledges that recruiting and retaining diverse talent depends to a large degree on the organizational conditions and behaviours that happen beyond recruitment of people with disabilities – i.e., through Commitment, Readiness and Retention. As a demand-driven intervention, the BC WiN initiative that gave rise to the Four Pillars framework focuses on employer needs, organizational conditions, and the work environment as significant variables of employment success for people with disabilities. While typical demand-led models take their cues from what jobs employers need filled or what job-related skills are required for in-demand occupations, there is increased attention on demand-side strategies that also include changing the behaviour of employers (Zizys, 2018). In the context of the Four Pillars framework, changing employer behaviours is a significant area of focus in creating more inclusive and accessible workplaces so that employers can access diverse talent.

This project’s research findings also emphasize that standards development requires an appreciation of the variety of employment contexts within the federally regulated private sector, which underscores the importance of widespread stakeholder engagement. As the consultations with experts with various provincial governments and in standards development noted, stakeholder involvement was a “very core part of the standards process.” At the employer level, stakeholder engagement also surfaced as important conditions to promote shared responsibility and accountability for DEI strategies and goals. Interviews noted that while standards can contribute minimum requirements to remove barriers in recruitment, hiring, and retention, there is a danger that they can be applied superficially if organizations do not engage in the ongoing work to address socially constructed barriers in the workplace:

“You can't just plug something on top and then address the biases or the uninformed behaviors or attitudes that are really getting in the way of an accessible place. That workplace where people with disabilities will stay and feel valued and like they have a career path. So, I think that's the risk is that by driving too much towards a compliance framework, we could have very superficial, like every business has a ramp to their work site so that someone with a wheelchair can get in. But they never address the ways that the people in the organization and the culture of the organization might be creating barriers. So, it's much harder to get out in legislation or in standards, I think is how do you create [an] attitudinal barrier-free workplace?” (Interview 1)

The research findings also highlight important considerations for effective and continuous engagement of stakeholders during the standards implementation process. As discussed, some of the most significant challenges encountered by employers in advancing their DEI strategies was the lack of organizational resources, lack of shared responsibility and accountability for achieving DEI goals, and lack of processes and strategies that emphasized incorporating DEI priorities into the daily work processes of all employees. As observed in one research study with employers on the Canadian National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, for effective implementation of standards to occur, employers must be committed to a lengthy process of continuous engagement with employees, requiring an organizational culture shift to effectively implement standards (Kalef et al., 2016).

RECOMMENDATIONS

This project was designed to provide an increased understanding of successful strategies and approaches to enable federally regulated employers to achieve minimum standards with respect to accessible workspaces, as well as demonstrate exemplary DEI practice and leadership with respect to hiring and retaining persons with disabilities. The following discussion summarizes the findings that emerged from this hands-on approach to employer engagement, emphasizing how standards can align with employers' current DEI strategies and employment approaches, highlighting areas where standards can support and reinforce promising practices, as well as where standards can play a role in enforcing minimum accessibility employment requirements.

1. Standards should establish an understanding of a social model of disability, which is required to uphold accessible and inclusive employment practices.

A social model sees 'disability' as the result of the interaction between people and an environment with physical, attitudinal, communication and social barriers. It emphasizes

that instead of requiring an individual to change or adapt to this environment, employers need to make workplaces more inclusive and accessible to people with disabilities.

However, a social model of disability is still not a mainstream concept with employers. Without this explicit grounding and an expectation that the employer needs to proactively identify and remove barriers, changes to the workplace may replicate harmful misconceptions that adjustments and accommodations are “out of the ordinary.”

A social model underscores principles of collective responsibility to address barriers in employment and expands the understanding of accessibility beyond the built environment.

2. A commitment to accessibility and inclusion needs to be a shared responsibility bringing stakeholders together to drive change.

While accessibility and inclusion at minimum requires a leadership commitment, findings emphasize that employers need to share responsibility for accessibility and inclusion beyond the leadership team and HR personnel or specialists. In addition to dedicating resources, champions need to be identified at all levels of the organization, and employers should consider incorporating DEI priorities into employee performance evaluations. Shared responsibility and accountability in accessibility plans are required so that all employees take ownership of DEI, with clear targets and a measurement strategy to track progress, create transparency, and build momentum for accessible and inclusive priorities.

In addition, in unionized workplaces, union engagement and commitment are essential for advancing accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities. Meaningful inclusion of employees with lived experience in the decision-making process needs to recognize the contribution and labour involved in sharing lived experience. Promising practices include compensation for chairs of Employee Resource Groups, dedicated support from senior management for employee-led groups and ensuring clear lines of responsibility and accountability.

3. Employment practices should be reviewed to establish and build the trust of people with disabilities, acknowledging disclosure depends on trust.

Opportunities for confidential, positive, and voluntary self-disclosure are required across the entire employee lifecycle. While organizations often depend on self-identification to benchmark workplace diversity, understand gaps, and set goals, disclosure depends on trust and a culture of inclusion in the first place. Therefore, measurement should be viewed holistically with respect to developing employers’ disability inclusion capacity, and employers consider other ways to track progress, beyond self-identification.

Creating a culture in which employees trust the disclosure process also includes reviewing employment practices for accessibility and inclusion – sick days, long-term absences, benefits, pay equity and promotion all contribute to inclusive work environments. Perceived disconnection between the daily work environment and inclusive statements to self-identify may lead to employees feeling distrustful of such measurement exercises.

Equally, if employee awareness or disability inclusion training is not applied to day-to-day realities of employees, it may be viewed with suspicion and/or be ineffective. Training should align with organizational priorities and values, address how concepts can be applied within interpersonal communications and teams and should be measured to understand its impact on changing workplace behaviours. As well, training itself must be delivered in an accessible and inclusive way, recognizing that not all employees are in roles where e-learning is effective or appropriate.

4. Accessible recruitment and hiring processes need to go beyond the passive approach of ‘accommodations are provided upon request’ to be accessible and inclusive by design.

Barriers in recruitment should be removed by focusing on the essential skills/qualifications for the role, addressing the language of postings, and barriers in job application software. Restrictive screenings that disadvantage people with disabilities who may have gaps in their employment history or fulfill job requirements through unpaid forms of experience should also be reviewed.

With respect to interviewing, identification and removal of barriers should also consider language and instructions for neurodiverse candidates and ensure that online platforms may not be adequate in addressing communications needs. Acknowledging that candidates may prefer not to disclose a disability during the hiring process, interviews should be barrier-free by design, with a standard list of alternatives and adjustments that all candidates may choose from.

As a promising practice, internships, mentorships, and dedicated employment programs for people with disabilities provide unique benefits to both candidates and the employer. They provide job experience and skills development for people with disabilities, while deepening the employer’s knowledge and skills to support people with disabilities. They also may provide a platform for innovation and collaboration to create flexible ways of working that can be scaled throughout the organization.

5. Retention of people with disabilities depends on inclusive employee-manager relationships and an accessible onboarding experience.

The first weeks and months of an employee’s experience are crucial for determining whether they will continue in their roles and with the organization. Accessible onboarding includes agreed-upon adjustments are ready for the employee’s first day; orientation documents are in plain language and provided in alternative formats; regular check-ins and verbal and written communication are supplemented throughout the process; and ensuring the entire team is ready to welcome and support the new employee.

As managers and direct supervisors play a significant role in the retention of employees, all should have a baseline of inclusive competencies and skills. Employers should consider defining inclusive leadership skills and support managers’/supervisors’ development in this area with clear expectations regarding how to develop this capacity. Different models of inclusive leadership competencies vary but may include areas of interpersonal communication; knowledge of employer responsibilities, such as Duty to Accommodate; ways to address and adapt to employees’ diverse needs while responding to business needs; and promoting trust and respect amongst team members.

APPENDIX A: REVIEW OF DEI ASSESSMENT TOOLS, APPROACHES, AND STUDIES

Organization/Website	Tool format	Domains
1. Open Door Group/President's Group Disability Inclusive Employer Self-Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 35 practice questions on accessibility and inclusion (already completed, underway, not yet started, don't know) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hiring and retention Employee benefits Physical and digital accessibility Organizational culture Measurement
2. CASE HR Inclusive Polity Toolkit Employer Self-Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 true/false or multiple-choice questions based on scenarios 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talent and retention (performance management) Inclusive hiring (recruitment, selection, and interviewing) Workplace culture (team dynamics and collaboration) Inclusive communication Return to work
3. Government of Ontario Accessibility Standards Checklist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Checklist to identify the requirements under the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment Standards compliance: recruitment, assessment, selection, accommodations; employee supports; accessible communication supports; workplace emergency response; performance management; career development/advancement; redeployment
4. Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employer Practices Related to Employment Outcomes Among Individuals with Disabilities (Cornell University) BenchmarkABILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combined assessment and tracking tool in six specific categories to benchmark and monitor employer progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment & Hiring Career Development & Retention Accessibility & Accommodation Compensation & Benefits Diversity & Inclusion Metrics & Analytics

Organization/Website	Tool format	Domains
<p>5. Disability:IN Disability Equality Index</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An objective and confidential benchmarking process, receiving a score between 0 and 100 in six categories where 80 and above is considered “Best Places to Work for Disability Inclusion” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Culture & Leadership ▪ Enterprise-Wide Access ▪ Employment Practices ▪ Community Engagement ▪ Supplier Diversity ▪ Non-U.S. Operations
<p>6. Disability Confident Employer Scheme (UK Department for Work and Pensions)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Three levels (Disability Confident Committed, Disability Confident, Disability Confident Leader) including employer self-assessment, external validation, and voluntary employer reporting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Organisational policies in relation to the recruitment and retention ▪ Support offered to employees with specific disabilities ▪ Networks and support groups ▪ Progression and pay ▪ Workplace adjustments ▪ Employee engagement scores ▪ Mental health and wellbeing
<p>7. International Labour Organization – Global Business and Disability Network Model Self-Assessment Tool</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 20 yes/no questions aligned with the 10 principles of the ILO Global Business and Disability Network Charter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Disability rights ▪ Non-discrimination ▪ Equality of treatment and opportunities ▪ Accessibility ▪ Job retention ▪ Confidentiality ▪ Attention to all types of disabilities ▪ Collaboration ▪ Evaluation ▪ Knowledge sharing

Organization/Website	Tool format	Domains
<p>8. Public Services Health & Safety Association</p> <p>Disability Management Self-Assessment Tool</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 39 yes/no questions aligned with the Disability Management Standards Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Disability Management Policy and Workplace Resources ▪ Joint Worker-Management Support and Empowerment ▪ Responsibility, Accountability and Authority ▪ Workplace Culture and Policy Development ▪ Information and Communication Management ▪ Benefit Design and Influences ▪ Knowledge and Skills of the Disability Management Practitioner ▪ Disability Prevention ▪ Accident Prevention and Safety Programs ▪ Occupational Ergonomics ▪ Health Promotion and Wellness ▪ Injury, Disability and Lost Time Patterns ▪ Disability Cost Benefit Data ▪ Early Intervention and Timely Return to Work Process ▪ Early Intervention and Worker Communication Protocol ▪ Case Management Procedures ▪ Return to Work Coordination ▪ Transitional Work Options ▪ Workplace Accommodations
<p>9. Canadian Equality Consulting DEI Assessment Services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A full expert-led assessment lasting between 3 months and one year in length, depending on organization size and timelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Intersectional approach into a comprehensive findings and recommendations report
<p>10. Employment Equity Network The Inclusion Project</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pre-employer survey and expert-led assessment of inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Accessibility, Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (AREDI+) process takes an intersectional and iterative approach to addressing complex issues of race-based, gendered, and other forms of discrimination. The Anti-Racism Anti-Harassment (ARAH) framework covers specific action to eliminate behaviors and policies that may prevent racialized Canadians and newcomers to Canada from accessing equitable opportunities based on racial, gendered and (dis)ability-based discrimination.

APPENDIX B: FOUR PILLARS ASSESSMENT

ASC Employer Community of Practice – Self-Assessment of the Four Pillars to Accessible Employment

Overview

Welcome to this tool for organizational self-assessment of the Four Pillars to Accessible Employment. The tool was developed for the *Employment Accessibility Standards for Recruitment and Retention of People with Disabilities* project.

The goal of the project, which is funded by Accessibility Standards Canada, is to provide information to be used in the development of workplace employment standards for people with disabilities, specifically focused on recruitment and retention practices. The project engages directly with employers in a Community of Practice, first in British Columbia and then across Canada, to identify and test a range of accessible employment practices with respect to recruiting and retaining persons with disabilities in their workplaces.

The project team is composed of researchers, Inclusive Workplace Consultants, and administrators primarily through a partnership between the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and MacLeod Silver HR Business Partners that leverages their resources and experiences from the BC Partners in Workforce Innovation initiative (BC WIN). BC WIN is a demand-led initiative to provide job matching services and employer capacity supports to 12 – 15 small, medium, and large-scale employers in British Columbia (see www.bcpartnerswin.org).

If you have any questions, please contact Shawn de Raaf, Research Director, at 604-601-4077 or email sderaaf@srdc.org

The purpose of this tool is:

- Help Community of Practice (CoP) members and their organization gather information to reflect on organizational strengths, prioritize areas for change and/or improvement, and help to identify the specific accessible employment practices that they will implement and test throughout their participation in this research project;
- Foster a dialogue within members' own organizations that leads to greater understanding and action on ways to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their workplace; and
- Facilitate sharing of information, resources, and mutual support among CoP members.

This tool is not about evaluating or comparing organizations amongst each other. It's about reflecting on your organization and meeting you where you are – whether you are just starting out or want to focus on ways to strengthen an existing practice. Once completed, the results will be kept confidential and only shared amongst the project Research Team.

Instructions:

1. Schedule a time to meet with the BC WiN Inclusive Workforce Consultant (IWC) team to complete the assessment together. The IWC team can discuss the overall process with you and answer any questions that you may have.
2. Review the self-assessment tool. You may want to engage other team members or your organizational leadership and employee resource group (ERG) members to review this tool as well. The tool is not designed as a mechanism for engaging all staff in an organization, so you'll want to collaborate with subject matter experts or leaders familiar with your organization's DEI plans and activities.
3. Complete the self-assessment with the IWC team who will be able to address any questions or provide support you may require through this process.
4. Complete the one-page summary of results of the tool with strengths, challenges and identified next steps/action areas.
5. The completed self-assessment will be used by your organization and BC WiN to begin to implement and test action areas.

Date Completed:

Self-Assessment Completed by:

BC WiN IWC Team Member:

Organizational Context

Please describe briefly how long your organization has been working to create accessible employment practices:

Please describe briefly what is driving your organization’s current interest and engagement in accessible employment:

Commitment: Building a Foundation for Inclusion	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established, and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
We have established a core Inclusive Workforce Committee to guide the development and implementation of our DEI vision and plans.							
We have established terms of reference on our shared DEI commitments with stakeholders – especially union leads.							
We have a shared DEI vision, goals, and strategic plan that includes persons with disabilities, and it has been communicated by senior leaders.							
Our DEI commitment spans all levels of our organization, such as formal engagement and support of our unions, if applicable.							

Commitment: Building a Foundation for Inclusion	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established, and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
We have established an accountability process including measurable goals and performance data (organizational and employee level).							
We have made a financial commitment in the form of resources, headcount, and training budget for DEI implementation.							
We identified opportunities to strengthen a diverse talent pool throughout the employment lifecycle (i.e., initial hiring, employee development, promotion, return to work).							
We have explored ways to augment full-time, part-time or temporary roles for persons with disabilities through internships, co-op, casual, or customized positions.							
We have reviewed our procurement practices to ensure diversity in sourcing and vendor relationships.							
With an understanding that barriers are socially constructed, we are prepared to focus on abilities in relation to the job instead of focusing on a person's impairment or difference.							
We have established, involve, and continue to support an employee resource group (ERG).							
Our human resources and leaders are trained to raise awareness and drive the strategic plan.							

Commitment: Building a Foundation for Inclusion	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established, and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
We have identified ways to communicate our commitment to inclusion externally (e.g., website, job postings, career pages).							
We have established partnerships with community organizations to help with readiness activities and for diverse talent referrals.							
We are actively engaging with community partners to support inclusive hiring goals.							
We are committed to learning from, and sharing lessons learned, with other organizations that are committed to hiring diverse talent.							
We are committed to continuous improvement and review activities annually to remain accountable to our DEI vision and goals							

Readiness: Preparing Organizations to be Inclusive	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
We have designated a DEI lead to facilitate the implementation of the strategic plan and coordinate with the organization's leadership team.							
We have clarified roles, responsibilities, resources, and services to support managers adopt inclusive hiring and management practices.							
We have established a formal funding and approvals process for employee accommodations to ensure that existing and future employees may have their needs met in a timely way.							
We have developed and delivered communications so that all managers and employees in our organization know of our DEI priorities, plans, and leaders.							
We are reaching out and connecting with other DEI leaders in other organizations to learn and share best practices.							
We have connected with an external consultant or other subject matter experts and resources if additional organizational support is needed.							
We have applied a change management process to prepare managers and employees to shift recruitment and retention practices to be more inclusive.							

Readiness: Preparing Organizations to be Inclusive	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
We have collected employee data to benchmark our current representation of diversity.							
We are proactively addressing physical barriers on our premises (e.g., accessibility audits; meeting or exceeding building code).							
In the spirit of “nothing about us without us” we are including people with lived experience in our training and inclusive culture activities.							
Targeted roles have undergone a job evaluation process to review restrictions and accommodations requirements.							
We use empowering language around disabilities (e.g., adjustments) as we prepare to hire inclusively.							
We have established a process to reassess organizational needs, barriers, policies, and practices on an annual basis.							
We have identified training needs to support our DEI vision and plans, involving persons with lived experience, and have committed resources to training staff.							
Staff have undergone foundational training to build awareness of our organizational commitment, disability awareness, business advantages and practical solutions to recruitment and retention.							

Readiness: Preparing Organizations to be Inclusive	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
We are engaging all staff in training to increase their understanding of contributing to an inclusive workplace, address their unconscious bias, and creating a culture of inclusion for persons with disabilities.							
We have prepared hiring managers to shift their recruitment practices to support persons with disabilities at all stages of employment (e.g., from recruitment, onboarding, promoting, and supporting employees return to the workplace after an absence).							
We adjusted our recruitment practices to ensure that they are inclusive of persons with disabilities, including but not limited to addressing barriers in job descriptions, careers page, application processes, assessment/testing, and interviews.							
We have reviewed our employment benefits, employee assistance and/or wellness programs to ensure inclusive supports and practices are in place for all employees.							

Recruitment: Adapting the Recruitment Process to Hire Diverse Talent	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
We have positioned diversity as an asset and actively encourage candidates with disabilities to apply to positions.							
Our recruitment practices include intentional outreach to persons with disabilities, including recruitment partners/specialists, and supporting organizations to source candidates.							
We have set recruitment targets and goals (e.g., 25% of group hires).							
We have diversified our recruitment sources to include persons with disabilities.							
We have adaptive interview styles and approaches to ensure candidates are proactively accommodated and supported. This includes working interviews, work trials and use of non-behaviour-based interviews.							
We are working with service providers so that candidates with job coaches or other supported employment practices are included in interviews where appropriate.							
Our reference check requirements have been reviewed from an inclusion point of view and have been adapted where necessary.							
We promote an open discussion on any adjustments required to set up candidates for success at various stages of the hiring process.							

Recruitment: Adapting the Recruitment Process to Hire Diverse Talent	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
We have considered barriers in job design including work from home, flexible hours, and job shaping to the candidate's strengths and abilities.							
Our employment offers include information on adjustments identified in the hiring process and/or promote open discussion and disclosure so that adjustments are in place before a candidate starts the job.							
We have developed cohort-specific training with community partners, tailored to building diverse candidate pools for specific career opportunities.							
We are building candidate pools through work integrated learning, internships, or practicums to include persons with disabilities.							
We are building candidate pools for identified high demand occupations, known continuous openings or positions with group hires.							

Retention: Ensuring Full Engagement of Diverse Talent	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
All employees are supported with a respectful, psychologically healthy, and safe workplace.							
There is a view towards continuous improvement, and we will periodically seek feedback on the experience of all employees, including people with disabilities, to identify gaps, barriers, and opportunities.							
Our current performance management/review process has been reviewed to identify and remove systemic barriers to allow for employee growth and fostering of talent.							
Our succession process has been reviewed and key staff have been trained on how to promote diverse talent.							
Identified adjustments are in place prior to employees starting their position.							
New employees are onboarded to set them up for success, such as incorporating accessible job aids and on-the-job training to help with their orientation.							
There is a formal check-in and feedback process with new hires to ensure successful onboarding.							
Employees have access to peer supports and learning through an employee resource group.							

Retention: Ensuring Full Engagement of Diverse Talent	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Employees have a way to contribute their experiences and perspectives on DEI through both formal and informal feedback mechanisms.							
Employees with disabilities have a way to participate in the DEI decision-making processes within the organization.							
We have eliminated barriers in employee development practices to ensure that persons with disabilities can learn new skills or take on more responsibilities.							
There are employees with disabilities in management and leadership positions within our organization who can act as role models for employees.							
Career development plans are in place for people with disabilities who desire career development and progression within the organization							
DEI is embraced throughout our organization beyond HR specialists and new leaders are trained on DEI vision, plans, and best practices.							
DEI results are shared and celebrated throughout the organization. We recognize inclusive managers, leaders, and internal champions.							

Retention: Ensuring Full Engagement of Diverse Talent	<i>Have not started work in this area yet</i>	<i>Planning and development underway</i>	<i>This is in place and we have evidence of its use</i>	<i>This is well established and we can model it for others</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Unable to assess</i>	<i>Notes</i>
We connect and share our lessons learned with others in the community, by participating in local and national events, celebrating, and learning from others in the business community, and with the public.							
We are committed to continuous improvement and review activities annually to remain accountable to our DEI vision and goals.							

Self-Assessment Summary

This one-page summary should be completed after you have gone through the self-assessment tool.

Key Strengths (Based on the results of the self-assessment)

Gaps (Based on the results of the self-assessment)

Priority Areas for Action

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