

Employ Ability: Enhancing employer capacity to recruit and retain diverse people with disabilities

Employer guide



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INTRODUCTION

This guide is for employers interested in increasing the inclusivity and accessibility of their workplaces. The strategies and approaches described in this guide are focused on better recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees with disabilities. While directly focused on the needs of people with disabilities, many of the strategies and approaches described can help improve the engagement of your existing workforce and attract new talent from other equity-deserving groups or employees that value inclusive, supportive workplaces. This guide aims to complement other, more intensive programs, services, and collaborative initiatives, serving as a reference tool filled with practical and skill-based tips as you continue to learn more about building an inclusive workforce, establishing community partnerships, and upskilling your team to implement best practices.

People with disabilities are one of the largest under-tapped labour pools in Canada. Over a quarter of all Canadians (27%) aged 15 and older have at least one disability.¹ While many people with disabilities are employed and bring strong skills, education, and experience to the workplace—for example, over half (62%) of people with disabilities hold a post-secondary degree or certificate—they are still less likely to be employed than people without disabilities.²

By increasing the accessibility and inclusivity of your workplace for people with disabilities, you can better attract new talent. Through implementing inclusive practices and policies, you can also maximize the wellbeing, engagement, and productivity of current employees. As many people do not feel comfortable disclosing their disability to their employer, it is very likely that you have an employee with disabilities already. Additionally, championing inclusion can make your organization more competitive.

¹ Statistics Canada, 2023b.

² Statistics Canada, 2023c.

Approximately 62 per cent of Canadians prefer businesses that have policies designed to support people with disabilities.³ One study found that companies with disability inclusion initiatives reported 1.6 times more revenue, 2.6 times more net income and twice the economic profit than those without such initiatives.⁴

This guide aims to equip leaders and Human Resources (HR) managers with the skills, tools and resources to champion organizational change. In addition to providing a variety of options and actions to support inclusive employment, we aim to support employers in building their capacity to actively listen, consult, and support employees with disabilities, taking into account individual strengths, abilities, and needs. The content in this guide was developed based on a literature review and environmental scan of best practices and refined through consultations with inclusive employers and supported employment service providers. Where possible, we highlight the experiences and input from Canadian employers, that describe the steps they have taken on their inclusive employment journeys.

NAVIGATING THE GUIDE

The first section of the guide, [Building the Foundation](#), describes foundational considerations that will help you think about inclusion and accessibility. This section includes information on respectful language, myths and misconceptions about people with disabilities in the workplace, and strategies to strengthen your workplace.

This is followed by four sections with specific policy and practice recommendations across four stages of employment: recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and retention and advancement. Within each of these sections, we explore how leaders can leverage transferable social-emotional skills to cultivate a strong and diverse workforce.

- Jump to [Recruitment](#)
- Jump to [Hiring](#)
- Jump to [Onboarding](#)
- Jump to [Retention and Advancement](#)

Throughout the guide, we link to relevant resources that can help you implement specific policies and practices. We also encourage you to connect with job networks and employment service providers who can provide coaching and advice as you progress along your journey to creating a more inclusive workplace.

³ Angus Reid Institute, 2021.

⁴ Accenture, 2023.



CHAPTER 1: BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

In this section, we first provide a background on disability. Then, we review guidelines on how to talk about disabilities using respectful language. Next, we explore ten common myths and misconceptions about people with disabilities in the workplace, and the benefits of including people with disabilities in the workplace. Finally, we propose strategies for strengthening the engagement and wellbeing of your workforce.

WHAT IS A DISABILITY?

Disabilities are conditions that limit individuals' ability to function in society. Disabilities occur when there is a mismatch between societal expectations and individuals' *impairments* (conditions that limit or change individuals' functioning, often medical conditions). For example, an individual may use a wheelchair if they have a medical condition that makes it painful or difficult to walk (an impairment). This person is *disabled* because society is built for people who are able to walk (e.g., stairs are more common than ramps, standard desks and counters are at a standing height, etc.). As another example, depression causes changes in mood and energy levels (an impairment). Depression is a *disability* when those changes make it difficult for a person to meet social expectations in work, life, or relationships.

When we describe and speak about disability, we are referring to a large population of people with a wide range of skills, abilities, and characteristics. Disabilities may be physical and/or mental, chronic or temporary, permanent or episodic, visible or invisible, mild or severe, diagnosed or undiagnosed, disclosed or undisclosed. Individuals may be born with a disability, or impairments may emerge at any point during our lifetime.

Disability inclusion and the changing nature of work

The ever-increasing role of digital tools and technology creates both opportunities and challenges for inclusion. On one hand, people with disabilities are disproportionately employed in entry-level jobs and in occupations that are at risk of automation.^{5,6} On the other hand, the increased use and capacity of technology also creates opportunities for integrating assistive technology and addressing barriers to employment for some persons with disabilities.⁷ For example, the increased number of fully remote positions and flexible work hours that began during the COVID-19 pandemic created many more accessible positions for people with disabilities.⁸ This rapid change was a powerful illustration of the ability of employers to adjust workplace norms to accommodate emerging needs.

Additionally, the changing demographics require employers to change with the times to bring in and retain top talent. New generations of employees are entering the workforce, with new expectations of their employers.⁹ Younger employees tend to highly value employers that champion diversity and inclusivity and place more value on work-life balance.¹⁰ As the older generations of the workforce age, there is likely to be an increase in the number of employees who develop disabilities that need to be accommodated within their existing workplaces. Table 1 outlines the most common disability types in Canada, along with the percentage of the overall population with this disability, and the average age of onset.^{11,12}

Table 1 Disability type, prevalence, and age of onset

Disability Type	Prevalence	Average age of onset
Pain-related	17%	45
Flexibility	11%	53
Mobility	11%	53
Mental health-related	10%	28 (median age 21)
Seeing	7%	35
Hearing	6%	47

⁵ Tompa, Samosh, & Boucher, 2020.

⁶ Fundación ONCE, & ILO Global Business and Disability Network, 2019.

⁷ Raja, 2016.

⁸ Zou et al., 2022.

⁹ Fundación ONCE, & ILO Global Business and Disability Network, 2019.

¹⁰ Miller, 2021.

¹¹ Morris & McDiarmid, 2021.

¹² Statistics Canada, 2023a.

Disability Type	Prevalence	Average age of onset
Learning	6%	23 (median age is 10)
Dexterity	5%	53
Memory	5%	44
Developmental	2%	16 (average age of diagnosis, not onset)

What are employers' legal responsibilities related to people with disabilities?

Workers rights and disability rights are described in the [Employment Equity Act \(1995\)](#) and the [Accessible Canada Act \(2019\)](#). Employers are prohibited from discriminating against individuals with disabilities, and are required to provide reasonable accommodations for the individuals to perform essential job duties.^{13,14} This guide focuses on best practices in inclusion and does not cover legal responsibilities. Some additional resources on legal responsibilities are listed below:

- [Workplace Accessibility in Canada \(Canadian Civil Liberties Association\)](#)
- [What is the Duty to Accommodate? \(Canadian Human Right Commission\)](#)
- [Disability Inclusion Database by Disability](#)
- [Accessibility in Ontario: Information for businesses \(Government of Ontario\)](#)
- [Discrimination based on disability and the duty to accommodate: Information for employers \(Ontario Human Right Commission\)](#)
- [An Employer's Guide to Employment Rules \(Government of Alberta\)](#)
- [Disability, Illness, and Injury \(Alberta Human Rights Commission\)](#)
- [Employer's Handbook on the Accessibility Standard for Employment \(Manitoba Accessibility Office\)](#)
- [FAQ: The Accessibility Standard for Employment \(Manitoba Accessibility Office\)](#)

¹³ Government of Canada, 1995.

¹⁴ Government of Canada, 2019a.

RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE

A good first step to disability inclusion is getting comfortable talking about disabilities using respectful language. It's natural to worry about making mistakes, but this should not deter you from engaging in meaningful conversations. The key to mastering inclusive language lies in staying open-minded, curious, and receptive to feedback.¹⁵ The guiding principles below provide some helpful tips and information to get you started.

Remember, disability is not a bad word. Many people have been taught to view disability as something negative, and you may feel unsure if it's okay to discuss or even use the word disability. However, disabilities are a normal and natural part of human diversity and the human experience. Over a quarter of Canadians have a disability.¹⁶ The majority of us have people with disabilities in our lives, and some of us will develop a disability later in life. Avoiding the word disability (or avoiding the topic entirely) can imply that there is something shameful associated with disability. Similarly, terms like “differently abled” or “special” may be intended to be positive, but they can often feel patronizing. Using clear, straightforward language is generally perceived as more respectful.¹⁷

Do not see disability as a bad word. Disability is not a bad word. People with disabilities come in with unique skill sets and perspectives and can help us make better products and services. (Employer)

Language is always changing – it's okay to make mistakes. The preferred or “politically correct” language evolves as our social values change, and people and communities find ways to better describe their diverse experiences.¹⁸ These changes help us talk about disabilities in ways that make people feel comfortable and respected. However, it's understandable if you are not always certain of the latest terminology, and it's okay to make mistakes. If you use the wrong term, apologize and remember for next time.

Ask people their preferred terminology, or listen to the terms they use to describe themselves.¹⁹ You can talk about disabilities using person-first language or identity-first language. Person-first language places the person before their disability when addressing them. For example, the term *person with a learning disability* is usually preferred over *learning disabled*. Identify-first language reflects disability as a central part of a person's identity, and can be used to express pride.²⁰ For example, many Autistic people prefer the term *Autistic* rather than a *person with autism*.²¹ Different disability

¹⁵ ADA National Network, 2018.

¹⁶ Statistics Canada, 2023b.

¹⁷ ADA National Network, 2018.

¹⁸ Andrews, Powell & Ayers, 2022.

¹⁹ Government of Canada, 2024.

²⁰ Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021.

²¹ Government of Canada, 2024.

communities and different people have different preferences for person- or identity-first language.²² Ask people for their preferred terminology, or listen to the terms that they use to describe themselves. The next table includes examples of inclusive language to talk about disability, using both person-first and identity-first language.

Language is a big thing – using the correct language – but language is always changing. I’m going to say the wrong thing at some point, and I’m a subject matter expert! Just be curious – you know, ‘oh, how do you like to have that referred to’ or, once you’re corrected, then, ‘oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know that.’ It doesn’t need to be as scary as people think. (Employer)

Respect disability as an aspect of identity, rather than equating it with disease. Avoid using words like “suffering” or “sick” when describing people with disabilities. Also, refrain from using the term “patient” when referring to people with disabilities unless it is within the medical context where the person is actively seeking medical services.²³

Similarly, avoid describing people as inspirational solely based on their disability. Many people see their disability as just one aspect of their life experience and do not wish to be perceived as inspiring simply for doing everyday tasks. Using terms like “brave,” “an inspiration,” or “heroes” to describe living with a disability implies that disability is inherently negative.²⁴ Learn more from the disability activist, Stella Young, [I’m not your inspiration, thank you very much](#).

Establishing a foundation of respectful and inclusive communication is crucial for creating a welcoming and inclusive workplace. In the next section, we address common concerns and misperceptions about employing people with disabilities to further illustrate the benefits of an inclusive workforce.

²² Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021.

²³ Government of Canada, 2024.

²⁴ TED, 2014.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE EXAMPLES

Community	Person-first language	Identity-first language	Terms to avoid
General Disability	People with a disability	Disabled people	Handicapped
Intellectual and Developmental Disability	People with intellectual disabilities; People with developmental disabilities; People with autism	Autistic people	Intellectually challenged; intellectually disabled people
Mental Health	People living with a mental health condition; People with psychiatric disabilities	N/A	Mentally ill
Deaf or Hard of hearing	People who are deaf or hard of hearing	Deaf people	Mute; the deaf; suffer from hearing loss
Vision impairment	People with vision loss; people who are blind	Blind people	The blind; the visually impaired
Physical disability	People with physical disabilities; people who use wheelchairs	Wheelchair user	Handicapped; wheelchair bound

Sources: Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion — Person-First and Identity-First Language; Government of Canada — A way with words and images: guide for communicating with and about people with disabilities

MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Employers that are not confident working with people with disabilities often have questions or concerns about hiring people with disabilities. Many employers worry about decreases in productivity, employee safety, lack of time and resources to provide, and negative impacts on team performance and culture.²⁵ In this section, we unpack and address these concerns, summarized in the table below.

²⁵ Ready, Willing & Able, 2018.

Table 2 Myths and realities of employing people with disabilities

Myths	Realities
<i>People with disabilities are not interested in employment.</i>	Just like people without disabilities, many people with disabilities want to work. Among people with disabilities who are not employed or enrolled in educational programs, 39 percent are actively seeking employment.
<i>People with disabilities need to take more time off work because of their conditions.</i>	Employees with disabilities often have lower absenteeism and lower turnover rates than employees without disabilities. ^{26,27} For example, in one Canadian case study, employees with disabilities had half of the number of absences (3 days) compared to employees without disabilities (6.5 days). ²⁸
<i>It is not possible to ask about disability during the interview process, so limitations may not be discovered until later.</i>	In the interview process, you can ask if candidates are able to perform the job tasks and if they require any accommodations to succeed in the role.
<i>People with disabilities have limited skills and qualifications.</i>	People with disabilities bring a wide variety of skills, interests, abilities, and experiences to the workplace. Approximately, 62 per cent of people with disabilities have a post-secondary degree. ²⁹
<i>People with disabilities have lower job performance and/or productivity.</i>	When accommodation needs are met, people with disabilities tend to be highly productive and often bring strengths to the role that are beneficial for business. ^{30,31} For example, one study found that employees with disabilities had a 28 percent higher net value than employees without disabilities, largely due to higher job performance and lower turnover. ³²
<i>Accommodations are expensive.</i>	Accommodations are usually inexpensive or no-cost. Approximately half of accommodations cost nothing at all and 43 per cent requiring a one-time expense of under \$300.
<i>Providing accommodations to some employees will have a negative impact on workplace culture.</i>	Employers that provide accommodations generally find that it improves employee engagement and morale, as it signals that they value employee wellbeing. ³³

²⁶ Bonaccio et al., 2019.²⁷ Lindsay et al., 2018.²⁸ Fisher & Connelly, 2020.²⁹ Statistics Canada, 2023c.³⁰ Lindsay et al., 2018.³¹ Fisher & Connelly, 2020.³² Fisher & Connelly, 2020.³³ Bonaccio et al., 2019.

Myths	Realities
<i>There is a lack of suitable positions for people with disabilities.</i>	Many people with disabilities can complete standard job tasks without modification. Others may complete job tasks with some adjustments in the way tasks are completed or with the help of accommodations.
<i>People with disabilities are difficult to recruit.</i>	There are many strategies and approaches to better access this talent pool, including updating job descriptions, clearly marketing your business as an inclusive employer, reassessing where jobs are posted, recruiting through supported employment services and other disability-focused organizations, and implementing new hiring methods. ^{34,35,36,37}
<i>It is difficult to discipline or let go an employee with a disability and opens employers up to legal liability.</i>	Employees with disabilities can be let go if they are not meeting job performance requirements, just like employees without disabilities.

Myth: People with disabilities are not interested in employment. Because many disabilities are undisclosed, employers often underestimate the number of people with disabilities among their job candidates and employees.³⁸ Among people with disabilities who are not employed or enrolled in educational programs, 39 percent are actively seeking employment or intend to look for a job in the next year.³⁹ When employed in roles that align with their skills and interests, people with disabilities often report high levels of motivation, job satisfaction, and empowerment.^{40,41} For many, work is a meaningful activity, a source of identity, and an opportunity for social interaction, which serve as additional motivations to attend and engage at work.^{42,43}

Myth: People with disabilities need to take more time off work because of their conditions. Contrary to popular belief, research has shown that employees with disabilities often have lower absenteeism and lower turnover rates than employees without disabilities.^{44,45} For example, in one Canadian case study, employees with disabilities had half of the number of absences (3 days) compared to those without

³⁴ Bonaccio et al., 2019.

³⁵ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

³⁶ Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023.

³⁷ Hire for Talent, n.d.

³⁸ Bonaccio et al., 2019.

³⁹ Morris et al., 2018.

⁴⁰ Fantinelli et al., 2022.

⁴¹ Aichner, 2021.

⁴² Aichner, 2021.

⁴³ Saunder & Ndelec, 2014.

⁴⁴ Bonaccio et al., 2019.

⁴⁵ Lindsay et al., 2018.

disabilities (6.5 days).⁴⁶ Many studies find that hiring people with disabilities results in lower turnover costs or the costs to re-hire or re-train new workers.⁴⁷

Myth: It is not possible to ask about disability during the interview process, so limitations may not be discovered until later. Jobseekers and employees with disabilities may be hesitant to disclose their disabilities due to fears of stigma, discrimination, or retaliation. It is important to focus on asking about specific tasks and abilities relevant to the job rather than probing into whether someone identifies as a person with a disability or the details of their ability.⁴⁸ In the interview process, you can ask if candidates are able to perform the job tasks and if they require any accommodations to succeed in the role.

Myth: People with disabilities have limited skills and qualifications. Like people without disabilities, people with disabilities bring a wide variety of skills, interests, abilities, and experiences to the workplace. Nearly two-thirds of people with disabilities (62%) have a post-secondary degree or certificate, despite persistent barriers challenging their educational attainment.⁵⁰ People with physical disabilities bring the same cognitive skills as jobseekers without disabilities. Those with cognitive differences and **neurodivergence** often excel in areas such as thinking visually, recognizing patterns, and non-linear thinking.⁵¹ Additionally, people with disabilities bring new perspectives to the workplace, which can help you to develop creative solutions, ideas, and products. As with any job position, employers can evaluate candidates on their skills and abilities and select the best person for the role.

Neurodivergent refers to people whose cognitive functioning diverges from the typical societal standards of “normal.” Autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia are common forms of neurodivergence.⁴⁹

Myth: People with disabilities have lower job performance and/or productivity. When accommodation needs are met, people with disabilities tend to be highly productive and often bring strengths to the role that are beneficial for business.^{52,53} For example, one study found that employees with disabilities had a 28 percent higher net value than employees without disabilities, largely due to higher job performance and lower turnover.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Fisher & Connelly, 2020.

⁴⁷ Lindsay et al., 2018.

⁴⁸ Bonaccio et al., 2019.

⁴⁹ Walker, 2014.

⁵⁰ Statistics Canada, 2023c.

⁵¹ Mahto, Hogan & Sniderman, 2022.

⁵² Lindsay et al., 2018.

⁵³ Fisher & Connelly, 2020.

⁵⁴ Fisher & Connelly, 2020.

People with disabilities come in with unique skill set and perspectives that help us make better products and services... We know that people who are blind or have low-vision have the most difficult time working on online services... I was able to find somebody who had all the knowledge, all of the IT and the coding knowledge that we needed, and he's blind. So it actually made him the best candidate because we, with him, could test [our online product] right away and not wait for the 2.0 rollout. He helps us make better products and services. (Employer)

EXAMPLES OF STRENGTHS

Some examples that showcase the strengths of people with disabilities include:⁵⁵

- Managers at Auticon, an IT company, discovered that employees with autism are great at finding patterns and staying focused on tasks. These skills are important for analyzing data and checking for errors.
- A British intelligence agency noted that employees with dyslexia excel at spotting anomalies in surveillance data.
- In Colombia, the Gran Estación mall has discovered that security guards who are wheelchair users have a unique advantage at spotting pickpockets. Their vantage point from the wheelchairs offers visibility at pocket height, while their mobility and upper body strength help them quickly apprehend thieves.

Rather than categorizing disability as advantageous for specific jobs, these examples aim to shed light on the diverse abilities and talents that people with disabilities bring to various professional settings that may be overlooked.

⁵⁵ Alemany & Vermeulen, 2023.

Myth: Accommodations are expensive. Many employers worry about the cost of accommodations for employees with disabilities. However, accommodations are usually inexpensive or no-cost.⁵⁶ A study of accommodation costs for US businesses found that **approximately half of accommodations costing nothing at all, 43 percent required a one-time expense of under \$300, and only seven percent of the requests incurred an ongoing annual cost.**⁵⁷ Common accommodations are flexible work arrangements, modifications to workstations (e.g., back support, ergonomic chair), and human or technical support.⁵⁸ As one example, an employee with a learning disability working in construction had difficulty measuring fractions of an inch when operating a saw.⁵⁹ As an accommodation, the company provided the employee with a small card displaying enlarged images of inch fractions so that the worker could easily compare the card to the ruler and accurately identify the needed fraction. The cost of this effective accommodation was \$5.⁶⁰

Employers often get confused and think that when I mention accommodation, it's going to be costly, [but] sometimes accommodations don't cost anything. It can simply be a redesign of a process. For example, we supported a client who couldn't tell time or read a clock. He went on break and didn't return to his workstation because he didn't know it was time. So, we had someone buddy up with him. (Service provider)

Myth: Providing accommodations to some employees will have a negative impact on workplace culture. There is a common concern among supervisors that accommodations for employees with disabilities might be perceived as favouritism or preferential treatment.⁶¹ Contrary to this belief, providing accommodations usually results in positive outcomes. Employers that provide accommodations generally find that it improves employee engagement and morale, as it signals that they value employee wellbeing.⁶² Providing accommodations can also improve the workplace experience. Some employers have found that when buddy systems or other cooperative supports are introduced, both employees without disabilities and employees with disabilities report higher engagement and morale.⁶³ Another best practice is to make accommodations available to all employees, regardless of ability, ensuring that all employees have the flexibility and resources they need to be their most effective. Because most accommodations are no- or low-cost, this is an affordable and effective way to productivity and engagement.

⁵⁶ Job Accommodation Network [JAN], n.d.

⁵⁷ JAN, n.d.

⁵⁸ Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2024.

⁵⁹ Corley & Tibbetts, 2002.

⁶⁰ Corley & Tibbetts, 2002.

⁶¹ Government of Canada, 2019b.

⁶² Bonaccio et al., 2019.

⁶³ Austin & Pisano, 2017.

There is a myth or thought that an accommodation means they're doing less work. And that's not what an [accommodation] is. The output should be the same. It's just how they're doing it or where they're doing it. (Employer)

Myth: There is a lack of suitable positions for people with disabilities. Many people with disabilities can complete standard job tasks without modification. Others may complete job tasks with some adjustments in the way tasks are completed or with the help of accommodations. There are many ways to make positions inclusive, especially when adaptive technologies, flexible work arrangements, and job crafting are embraced. For example, offering remote working options makes positions accessible for employees who perform better at home.

Employers can also consider reshaping job roles instead of strictly seeking the “right” person to fit a predefined job description (see the “Job Carving and Job Crafting” section below). This approach allows them to recruit people whose skills are well-suited for certain tasks, leading to a more effective and diverse utilization of talents within the workforce and benefitting employers by broadening the talent pool of qualified candidates.⁶⁴ Employers experienced in working with people with disabilities described how this type of flexibility can lead to innovations and creative solutions that improve workflow and efficiency of workplace practices.

Taking a flexible mindset. Just because a process has already always been done a particular way doesn't even mean it's necessarily the best one. So, have somebody come in who has autism, and you may find out that there's a different logic to it. That it could be done even faster, or maybe 3 steps could be removed, and you'll end up saving a lot of money. (Employer)

Myth: People with disabilities are difficult to recruit. Traditional recruitment and hiring methods often disadvantage job seekers with disabilities and make it difficult for employers to find the best candidate for the role.⁶⁵ For example, neurodivergent people often bring innovative problem-solving skills into workplaces, yet they may not conform to social expectations or social-emotional norms (e.g., maintaining eye contact and engaging in small talk), making it difficult to succeed in traditional interviews.⁶⁶ Alternative hiring practices can provide the opportunity for candidates to showcase their skills and potential. There are many strategies and approaches to better access this talent pool, including updating job descriptions, clearly marketing your business as an inclusive employer, reassessing where jobs are posted, recruiting through supported employment services and other disability-focused organizations, updating interview structure and questions, and implementing new hiring

⁶⁴ Austin & Pisano, 2017.

⁶⁵ Chang et al., 2023.

⁶⁶ Chang et al., 2023.

methods.^{67,68,69,70} As an added benefit, hiring people with disabilities tends to be positive for the company image, and can help to attract and retain diverse customers, particularly people with disabilities and those who value inclusion.⁷¹

Myth: It is difficult to discipline or let go of an employee with a disability and opens employers up to legal liability. Employers are legally prohibited from discriminating against individuals with disabilities in all aspects of employment—including hiring, firing, promotions, and compensation—and have a legal obligation to provide reasonable. However, this does not imply that employers need to have different standards or qualifications for hiring, retaining, and promoting people with disabilities. Employees with disabilities can be let go if they are not meeting job performance requirements, just like employees without disabilities. Terminating any employees should never occur based on their personal characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, gender-identity, or age). Establishing clear hiring standards and performance expectations, as well as recording any issues with performance and communicating these with employees are strategies to ensure open communication around human resource decisions.

We have discussed some common concerns and misconceptions about employing people with disabilities. In the next section, we move to the key building blocks that you can use to create a more inclusive workplace environment for people with disabilities (as well as for those without disabilities).

⁶⁷ Bonaccio et al., 2019.

⁶⁸ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

⁶⁹ Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023.

⁷⁰ Hire for Talent, n.d.

⁷¹ Lindsay et al., 2018.

STRENGTHENING YOUR WORKPLACE

In this section, we discuss three overarching approaches that can help you build a diverse and inclusive environment at work. First, we describe strategies to create an employee-centred workplace culture. Next, we present two strategies to help you better align job tasks and responsibilities with employees' strengths. Finally, we review how building the social emotional skills of managers and supervisors so that they have the tools and abilities they need to implement inclusive policies and support employees with disabilities.

Employee-centred workplace culture

Employee-centered organizations focus on creating an environment where employees feel respected, valued, and able to voice their opinions.⁷² Creating an employee-centred culture involves making sure that all employees (not just those in management positions) are encouraged to contribute ideas and feedback, have opportunities for skill development and career progression, and have a sense of pride and ownership over their work.⁷³ Employee-centered organizations are flexible; they seek to understand the unique strengths of their employees and assign them to work tasks that make the best use of these strengths.^{74, 75} The following three elements are critical to building an employee-centered workplace culture:⁷⁶



⁷² Post, 2023.

⁷³ Jones, 2014.

⁷⁴ Jones, 2014.

⁷⁵ Post, 2023.

⁷⁶ Ramchandani & Singh, 2020.

As a result, organizations with an employee-centred culture tend to benefit from higher levels of engagement, productivity, and loyalty from their staff.^{77, 78} Empowered employees tend to show higher levels of motivation, commitment, creativity, and job satisfaction, resulting in lower turnover rates, absenteeism, and higher levels of productivity for the organization.^{79,80} Employee engagement can also influence work quality and employee wellbeing; one study found that organizations with high engagement experience 64 per cent fewer safety incidents than those with low engagement.⁸¹ Finally, enablement plays a crucial role in fostering a productive and motivated workforce, giving employees the resources they need to deliver consistent results and innovate to improve approaches.^{82,83}

Creating an employee-centered workplace culture can make the workplace more inclusive for employees with disabilities. For example, employees with disabilities may benefit from having opportunities to contribute to decision-making, especially when it is related to disability inclusion policy. They also benefit from autonomy and flexibility in the way they complete work tasks, and when supports (i.e., accommodations) are provided so they have the resources they need to complete their work well.

Vignette: Employee-Centered Approaches to Support Employees with Disabilities

An employee with autism faced challenges in the busy open office and group meetings. To empower her, the HR team involved her in discussing various accommodation options and shared decision-making about her accommodations. They provided an engaging work environment to the employee; her manager assigned her to key projects where her strengths could directly contribute to the company's goals and her efforts were recognized in team meetings. Additionally, they enabled her success by offering a quiet workspace, noise-cancelling headphones, and ongoing access to training and resources. These adjustments not only improved the employee's productivity but also cultivated a more inclusive environment.

Job Carving and Job Crafting

Job carving and job crafting are approaches used to create better alignment between work tasks and employees' skills and abilities. These approaches can benefit both employers and their employees, as adjusting job tasks and responsibilities to match employees' skills can help employers get the most out of their workforce, while allowing employees to work on tasks where they naturally excel. As well as

⁷⁷ Jones, 2014.

⁷⁸ Post, 2023.

⁷⁹ Vu, 2020.

⁸⁰ Baldoni, 2013.

⁸¹ Gallup, 2023.

⁸² Jaskiewicz & Tulenko, 2012.

⁸³ Antoline, 2022.

benefitting employers through increasing productivity and employee engagement, these approaches help create more career opportunities for individuals with disabilities.⁸⁴

Job carving is a formal, employer-led process.⁸⁵ It involves deconstructing your job descriptions and re-organizing tasks and responsibilities to create new positions that are more accessible and focus on candidates' talents and abilities. This strategy allows businesses to effectively meet staffing requirements while promoting inclusivity and diversity in the workforce through task reallocation. Employment service providers can assist employers in tailoring positions (e.g., task analysis, brainstorming job creations and accommodations, job coaching) to re-organize job descriptions to create roles that are more inclusive and better use the talents of people with disabilities.

Examples: Job Carving

- Reorganizing responsibilities to create one position that can be fully remote, and another position that requires in-office work (rather than two blended positions).
- Creating a front-facing position that leverages one job-seekers strong social skills (e.g., networking, meeting clients, helping customers) and another focused on background work (e.g., planning, writing, analysis) that makes use of another employees' strong technical skills.

Job crafting is employee-led process and is often informal.⁸⁶ It involves employees taking the lead on tailoring their tasks, responsibilities, and/or the way that they complete work. This is often done through discussion with managers and colleagues to ensure that all work tasks are still being completed and business needs are being met. Job crafting may involve changing job responsibilities (e.g., swapping tasks with another employee, getting training to take on new responsibilities), changing approaches or processes, or making work hours or locations more flexible.

Examples: Job Crafting

- A barista who has started experiencing social anxiety requests taking on more back-of-house responsibilities (e.g., making drinks, restocking, cleaning, dishes) and reducing their customer-facing responsibilities (e.g., taking orders).
- An employee has trouble with memory and verbal communication. They reduce the number of meetings they attend and focus on communicating through messaging and email instead. They receive written instructions and feedback from their manager via email and use messaging apps to collaborate with colleagues.

⁸⁴ Brucker & Sundar, 2020.

⁸⁵ Scoppetta, Davern, & Geyer, 2019.

⁸⁶ Scoppetta, Davern, & Geyer, 2019.

Social Emotional Skills: Upskilling managers and supervisors to become inclusive leaders

Social emotional skills are important for leaders in the increasingly diverse, modern workplace. When leaders cultivate social-emotional skills in the context of disability inclusion, they reap benefits that extend beyond accommodating employees with disabilities.⁸⁷ For example, stronger collaboration skills that involve more empathetic perspective-taking enable leaders to better understand the needs of all employees, including employees with disabilities, in order to provide appropriate support and resources to help them thrive.⁸⁸ Stronger communication skills that include the aptitude to navigate sensitive conversations can help leaders approach discussions around flexible work arrangements with employees with disabilities as well as with other employees who could benefit from such practice, such as parents with young children. Stronger creativity skills enable leaders to challenge the status quo and find innovative solutions to accommodate the skills, needs, and preferences of employees with disabilities. This not only fosters a more inclusive work environment but can also drive innovation across the organization.

The Skills for Success (SFS) framework defines five key social emotional skills: **Communication, Collaboration, Adaptability, Problem Solving, and Creativity and Innovation**. The framework was developed and researched in consultation with employers and workers across various sectors and backgrounds, and reflects the skill needs of the modernized labour market.⁸⁹ The definitions of the five social emotional Skills for Success, and examples of how these skills can help you support employees with disabilities, are provided on the following page.

Social emotional skills are applicable throughout all stages of employment (hiring, onboarding, and retention and advancement). In the following sections, we provide more in-depth examples of skills how skills can be applied at each stage to better support people with disabilities.

⁸⁷ Nguyen et al., 2022.

⁸⁸ Nguyen et al., 2022.

⁸⁹ Palameta et al., 2021.

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Communication: Effective communication includes verbal, non-verbal, and written communication. Communication involves active listening skills, clear communication of your message, appropriate non-verbal communication, and adapting your communication to address different learning styles and communication needs (e.g., providing visuals, closed captions, or transcripts). For example, managers may provide written follow-ups with action items after meetings. As another example, managers may ask questions about an employee's preferred form of communication (e.g., meetings, emails, texts, phone calls).

Collaboration: Collaboration is the ability to work well with others. It includes valuing diversity, managing difficult interactions, facilitating cooperation, contributing to team goals, and reflecting on team performance. For example, a manager can organize regular check-ins where team members can share their progress, provide feedback, and work together to develop solutions to challenges.

Adaptability: Adaptability skills include abilities to demonstrate responsibility, persist through challenges, regulate emotions, set or adjust goals, plan and prioritize tasks, and seek self-improvement when faced with change. For example, employers with strong Adaptability skills can modify management approaches to accommodate changes in employee work schedules or adjust job assignments to align with people's abilities and skills. As another example, Adaptability can be used to rearranging the physical workspace to improve accessibility for an employee with mobility impairment or sensory sensitivities.

Problem solving: Problem Solving refers to the ability to identify, analyze, and resolve issues efficiently. Employers with strong problem-solving skills can better identify problems, understand the nature of the problem, break the problem down into smaller parts, gather information, and implement solutions. For example, managers can address declining team productivity by identifying if the issue (e.g., is it due to workflow inefficiencies or lack of support?), collecting feedback from the team, and proposing solutions (e.g., such as reorganizing tasks, providing assistive technology or workplace adjustments to enhance access to the resource).

Creativity and Innovation: Creativity and Innovation skills involve envisioning different possibilities, challenging preconceived notions, navigating uncertainty, expanding on ideas, and fostering a creative environment. Creativity and Innovation skills are particularly valuable for employers when working with employees with disabilities, as they may need to challenge assumptions and rethink traditional organizational practices to create more inclusive and accessible workplaces. For example, employers may develop alternative hiring evaluation processes (e.g., let candidates demonstrate their skills through a project-based assessment), or find innovative ways to align a candidate's skillset with the company's needs.



CHAPTER 2: RECRUITMENT

This section offers practical strategies to attract candidates and guide organizations through the recruitment process with accessibility in mind.

Many employers in Canada are facing a changing nature of work. As older generations of employees retire, digitization changes the nature and skill requirement of many jobs, and expectations and values around work-life balance evolve (e.g., increased desire to work from home), employers must be agile to continue to attract top talent. To find an employee with the right skills, you may need to widen your recruitment approach to reach—and appeal to—new pools of candidates.

People with disabilities are one such talent pool and are one of the largest under-employed populations in Canada. Many Canadians with disabilities have post-secondary education (62%) with the right skills for evolving job markets.^{90,91} However, the employment rate for working age Canadians (25-64) with disabilities (74%) is significantly lower than the rate for those without disabilities (88%).⁹² Among working-age people with disabilities who are not employed, two-thirds (42%) have the capacity to work; in other words, there are approximately 741,280 Canadians with disabilities who are employment ready with the right accommodations and support.⁹³ Updating your recruitment strategy to include people with disabilities can help your organization tap into a valuable and diverse workforce.

⁹⁰ Statistics Canada, 2023c.

⁹¹ Bonaccio et al., 2020.

⁹² Statistics Canada, 2023c.

⁹³ Hebert et al., 2024.

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS: RECRUITMENT

Building strong social-emotional skills can help your recruitment and hiring team (e.g., HR staff, hiring managers) effectively implement inclusive policies to better attract top talent. For example, Problem-Solving can help you identify skill gaps or challenges in your current recruitment practices; Creativity and Innovation skills can help you identify novel recruitment methods to better connect with new talent pools, including people with disabilities. The table below provides examples of how the social-emotional Skills for Success can be useful during hiring.

Skill	Example
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Craft job postings that focus on the most important information without unnecessary detail (e.g., include skills critical to perform the role instead of lists of desired qualities). ▪ Choose the tone, wording, and language of recruitment documents depending on the group(s) of jobseekers you are interested in hiring (e.g., messaging inclusivity to appeal to a wider range of candidates).
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collaborate with external organizations (e.g., supported employment centers) to connect with diverse pools of staff. ▪ Identify the value of diversity – see how building diverse teams is building on your organizational asset.
Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Anticipate changing needs of your organization and adapt your recruitment channels and expand your talent pools to address emerging skill and labour shortages. ▪ Acknowledge that there might be challenges and setbacks throughout the process and adopt a learning mindset can help the organization continuously improve.
Creativity and Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rethink existing recruitment practices by challenging norms, habits, and preconceptions of how recruitment needs to look. ▪ Support and empower others (e.g., HR staff, hiring managers) to come up with creative recruitment solutions.
Problem Solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Differentiate fact from opinion (e.g., move beyond anecdotal evidence and assumptions) by collecting information to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of your current recruitment approach. ▪ Collect data and feedback from key stakeholders (e.g., candidates and recruitment partners) to identify strengths and areas for improvement in recruitment efforts. ▪ Break challenges down into separate part to help identify solutions (e.g., recruitment message, recruitment location and approach, recruitment partners).

INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICES: RECRUITMENT

The practices are organized based on ease of implementation, with easier-to-implement practices listed first, followed by those that may require more time, effort, and resources. While these strategies in this section are widely considered best practices, they are not “one-size-fits-all”; every organization has different priorities, needs, and experiences with inclusive employment. Using your knowledge of the inclusion concepts described in the introduction, you can tailor these approaches to better fit your specific needs. Supported employment organizations (organizations that help connect employers and job seekers with disabilities) can be an additional resource to help you tailor solutions to your organization’s needs. These organizations are often able to provide coaching and resources free of charge.

Overview of recruitment policies and practices

Emphasize the company’s commitment to disability inclusion in job postings.

Ensure recruitment platforms are accessible (e.g., screen reader compatible).

Avoid relying solely on resume screening tools.

Review job descriptions for inclusivity and alignment with job tasks.

- Use inclusive language.
- Drop unnecessary qualifications not directly related to job tasks.
- Clearly describe essential skills and competencies required.

Develop partnerships to widen recruitment (e.g., community organizations, employment networks, employment service providers).

- Partner with communities and universities (e.g., offer internship and co-op programs to attract students with disabilities).
- Develop relationships with employment service providers.
- Join disability employment networks.

Emphasize your company’s commitment to diversity and inclusion. Many job seekers with disabilities—and those from other equity-deserving groups—prioritize applying to jobs at organizations that clearly demonstrate their inclusivity and commitment to diversity and inclusion. With the available talent pool increasingly including younger candidates, many of them strongly value diversity and inclusion, and favour workplaces committed to inclusion.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Miller, 2021.

“It makes a difference to employee engagement that we are an organization that cares about young workers and their training. Workers appreciate seeing and knowing that their employer is being a diverse and inclusive employer. Its an important element of employee engagement.” (Employer)

You can message your commitment to diversity and inclusion through statements on public-facing materials (e.g., company website), job advertisements, and through visible examples (e.g., demonstrating representation through having diverse staff, including in senior positions; offering generous benefits packages; offering accommodations and flexible work positions where possible). For example, job postings can mention that job seekers with disabilities are encouraged to apply and that the organization is committed to disability inclusion.^{95,96,97} Customized inclusion statements that speak to the values of your organization are more powerful than general, boilerplate inclusion statements.

Ensure recruitment platforms are accessible (e.g., screen reader compatible). Internet-based recruitment helps employers manage and organize job applications efficiently. Ensuring your recruitment platforms are fully compatible with assistive technology (e.g., screen readers) can help promote accessibility. If the application process involves pages with inactivity timeouts, leave ample time for applicants to respond.

“It’s pretty impossible to say you’re fully accessible. But, it makes it difference when people are at least trying.” (Service provider)

Avoid relying solely on resume screening tools. Automated screening techniques and tools (e.g., checking prerequisites, using surveys, and scanning technology) have been found to disproportionately filter out or discourage applications from people with disabilities.^{98,99} Screening software have limited accuracy and lack of linguistic flexibility. As a result, they can filter out resumes that do not match specific language or formatting, describe skills and experiences differently, or that show gaps in work history.¹⁰⁰ Due to limited availability of inclusive or accessible job positions, employer discrimination, or changes in health, people with disabilities may gaps in resumes. Including a human review of job applications to avoid biases like these can be time consuming, but it can ensure that you are not missing out on talent.

“There are fewer accessible jobs in the overall market... Because of that, people with disabilities can have a smaller, you could say, supply of jobs that they can apply to. And then you’re going to ones that have good attitudes about hiring

⁹⁵ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

⁹⁶ Hire for Talent, n.d.

⁹⁷ Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023.

⁹⁸ Inclusive Futures, n.d.

⁹⁹ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Nugent et al., 2020.

somebody with a disability. So all of a sudden that can shrink down for and further. So [I do] not judge a resume gap.” (Employer)

Review job descriptions for inclusivity and alignment with job tasks. Job descriptions are often the first point of contact you have with job seekers. Accessible job descriptions can help you attract talent, while inaccessible job descriptions and requirements present significant barriers to attracting qualified candidates with disabilities. There are examples and guides available online that provide examples and detailed guidance (e.g., EARN’s [Job Descriptions and Announcements checklist](#); Accessible Employer’s [How to Write Inclusive Job Postings](#) guide).

- Use inclusive language.** Ensure job postings do not contain language that is unwelcoming or discouraging to candidates with disabilities. This may include adjusting language to remove assumptions that all candidates are without disabilities (e.g., swapping “walk” for “move”). It can also mean including options for candidates to demonstrate skills in different ways. For example, one employer with a disability reflected on how earlier in their career, a job posted included the recruitment “attention to detail *or a proven workaround*”. This phrasing encouraged them to apply to the job because while their disability resulted in challenges in their attention to detail, they had strategies in place that allowed them to perform very well in detail-oriented work. Using inclusive language in your job postings or application forms can reassure job seekers with disabilities that their application will be taken seriously and increase the number of talented candidates that apply.

Example: Inclusive language in job postings

Common Language in Job Postings	More Inclusive Language
Must be able to lift 50 pounds	Moves equipment weighing up to 50 pounds
Attention to detail	Attention to detail or a proven workaround
Bending and crouching under desks to install equipment	Installs equipment, including under desks
Must be able to stand for the entire shift	Must be able to remain in a stationary position during the shift
Talk to clients about their financial concerns	Communicate with clients about their financial concerns
Walk throughout the building to access files	Move throughout the building to access files

Adapted from: <https://hiring.monster.com/resources/workforce-management/diversity-in-the-workplace/inclusive-job-descriptions/>

- Drop requirements and qualifications not directly related to job tasks.** Critically review the experience, education, and skill requirements in your job postings to ensure they are actually aligned with job tasks. Unnecessary prerequisites prevent the exclusion of qualified applicants. For example, employers often state a Bachelor’s degree requirement for jobs when other training or experience could adequately prepare a candidate for the position. Though prerequisites can help screen potential applicants, unnecessary requirements exclude candidates that could be a good fit for the role.^{101,102}
- Clearly describe required skills, abilities, and expectations.** Job postings should clearly communicate all essential duties and responsibilities using precise language. Where possible, provide concrete examples of specific aptitudes or behaviours. For example, describe what the employee is expected to do daily and provide details about the physical work environment, working hours, and any essential physical requirements.¹⁰³ Specific descriptions encourage only candidates with relevant skills to apply, reducing the number of candidates you need to filter out during the hiring process.

Example: Improving job descriptions

Common Job Requirement	Improved job requirement description
Excellent time management skills	Able to prioritize tasks, manage multiple projects, and adjust work plans to meet deadlines or in response to changing priorities.
Strong teamwork skills	Participates in team meetings, providing input and sharing ideas. Willing to help team members and offer support when needed.
Excellent customer service skills	Resolves customer inquiries within the timeframe outlined in the customer service guidelines (provide a link).

Note: More information and tips can be found at the following website: [How to Write Inclusive Job Postings](#). Employer Assistance and Resources Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) also developed a [checklist](#) for employers to evaluate disability-inclusive job descriptions and announcements.

¹⁰¹ Inclusive Futures, n.d.

¹⁰² Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023.

¹⁰³ Hire for Talent, n.d.

- **Develop partnerships to widen recruitment.** Community-based and employment support organizations can help you advertise job postings and ensure you are reaching candidates from new talent pools (e.g., people with disabilities).
- **Partner with communities and universities (e.g., offer internship and co-op programs to attract students with disabilities).** Reach out to community partners like schools, universities, and organizations serving specific populations, such as people with disabilities. These organizations often provide individualized employment support and advice for recruiting and can help build a “recruitment pipeline” with community organizations (e.g., providing pre-screening or customized matching services).¹⁰⁴ For example, many of these partners host career fairs specifically to connect employers with job seekers with disabilities.
- **Develop relationships with employment service providers.** Employment service providers serve as a bridge between employers and job seekers or employees with disabilities, supporting both employers and job seekers to find a good fit. These service providers can help match you with candidates well suited for your position, provide extra training to candidates (if needed), and provide job coaching to help new employees during the first months of employment. These services are usually provided free of charge. Partnering with employment service providers can help you find qualified candidates and expand your recruitment networks.^{105,106,107}
- **Join disability employment networks.** Similarly, there are employment networks specific to job seekers with disabilities that can help you connect with an under-accessed talent pool. In addition to helping you find candidates, many of these networks offer support, resources, and the opportunity to engage with like-minded employers.

¹⁰⁴ Kennedy, Jerdee, & Henneborn, 2019.

¹⁰⁵ One Mind at Work, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Kennedy, Jerdee, & Henneborn, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.



CHAPTER 3: HIRING

This section offers practical strategies to attract candidates and guide organizations through the hiring process with accessibility in mind.

Hiring the best candidate for the job can be a challenging process for employers. Often, the factors that help candidates stand out in traditional interviews (e.g., likeability, charisma, verbal communication) are not the only determinants of high job performance. Yet, these interpersonal skills frequently influence hiring decisions, which can lead to overlooking candidates who may lack interview polish but possess the technical expertise or problem-solving abilities crucial for success. Misalignment between the skills evaluated during the hiring process and the skills needed for the job leads employers to miss out on quality candidates and miss out on quality candidates and the chance to diversify the workforce.

There are many types of disabilities that make it difficult for candidates to showcase their skills in the traditional interview format. The policies and practices below will help you increase the accessibility and inclusivity of your hiring processes. These strategies will allow jobseekers with disabilities to better demonstrate their skills and abilities. They will also help your organization maximize the overall fit between candidates and roles in general.

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS: HIRING

Social emotional skills play an important role in the hiring process. Upskilling HR and other staff involved in hiring helps them overcome biases and come up with creative solutions to address emerging and evolving challenges. This can also ensure that all candidates, including candidates with disabilities, get a fair evaluation. The table below provides some examples of how the social emotional Skills for Success can be useful during hiring.

Skill	Example
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Think through the best method(s) to communicate with candidates (e.g., email, text, verbal, documents). Provide a written copy of important information. During interviews, listen to candidates' responses with an open mind, even if they are worded or communicated differently than you expect (e.g., slower speech, more direct responses, fidgeting while talking). Focus on the content of their responses to better assess their qualifications and potential. Make sure there are opportunities for candidates to ask questions before and during the interview.
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include multiple people and perspectives during the hiring process (e.g., interview panel, multiple rounds of interviews with different interviewers from diverse backgrounds), and engage in productive discussion together to evaluate candidates' qualities. Work with others (e.g., current employees, service providers) to create an interview process that allows all candidates to showcase their skills.
Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When possible, be flexible during the interview process. Does the candidate prefer to have the interview in a quiet room? Would they prefer a written copy of the interview questions to follow along during the interview? Make adjustments when possible. Adjust expectations for what the perfect candidate looks or sounds like, and refocus on the skills, aptitudes, and abilities required for the role.
Creativity and Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify limiting or artificial beliefs about how a hiring or interview process "should" look. Identify elements of the hiring process that are most important for your business. Be open to new ways of hiring. How are other organizations hiring? What ideas can be adopted? Come up with innovative approaches to test out or get a sense of candidates' skills and future performance (e.g., ask candidates to solve a task collaboratively to assess their interpersonal and technical skills, invite candidates to participate in a day of team-based activities to assess their skills in real-world scenarios).
Problem Solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put yourself "in the job seeker's shoes" to identify elements of the hiring process or space that may be barriers. What may be confusing or stressful about your organization's hiring process? Reflect on past hiring to identify challenge areas or opportunities for improving the hiring process (e.g., what skills were we able to evaluate? What areas did we miss?) Brainstorm solutions to streamline and improve hiring processes.

INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICES: HIRING

The policies and practices below can help you increase the inclusivity of your hiring practices and better identify, screen for, and select candidates that are good fits for your open job positions. Many studies find that employers report positive experiences and high return on investment after implementing initiatives focusing on hiring people with disabilities.^{108,109,110}

The practices are organized based on ease of implementation, with easier-to-implement practices listed first, followed by those that may require more time, effort, and resources. While these strategies in this section are widely considered best practices, they are not “one-size-fits-all”; every organization has different priorities, needs, and experience with inclusive employment. Using your knowledge of the inclusion concepts described in the introduction, you can tailor these approaches to better fit your specific needs. Supported employment organizations (organizations that help connect employers and job seekers with disabilities) can be an additional resource to help you tailor solutions to your organization’s needs. These organizations are often able to provide coaching and resources free of charge.

Overview of hiring policies and practices

Get comfortable talking about abilities and disabilities.

Offer accommodations to all candidates.

Review your hiring process for barriers, using an accessible interview checklist.

Diversify interview panels.

Provide inclusive interviewing and disability awareness training to staff involved in hiring and consider standardizing interview processes.

Ensure interview questions assess candidates’ abilities to complete job tasks and responsibilities.

Explore alternative interview formats.

Collaborate with service providers, like supported employment organizations, to explore alternative hiring strategies and brainstorm accommodations.

¹⁰⁸ Bonaccio et al., 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Kocman & Weber, 2016.

¹¹⁰ Lindsay et al., 2018.

Get comfortable talking about abilities and disabilities. There are many reasons candidates may or may not want to talk about their disability when applying for jobs. On one hand, there are many reasons job seekers may not want to disclose when applying for jobs. Job seekers may be worried about stigma or discrimination, may not have a formal diagnosis (diagnoses can be expensive to obtain), or they may simply feel that this information is private. On the other hand, their disability may be an important part of their life story and experience. Job seekers may want to talk about how their disability helps them perform better at certain tasks, or they may have stories to share about how their disability has helped them gain skills, knowledge, or experience that they can bring to the workplace.

In Canada, job seekers and employees are not required to tell employers about their disability, although they are required to share if they have limitations that prevent them from completing certain job tasks or requirements. It is best to allow the candidate to disclose or discuss their disability on their own terms. If candidates do share that they have a disability, you can ask questions about how this may impact their work – disability is not a taboo subject. If candidates do not share that they have a disability, you can ask questions about their ability to complete job tasks or ask about any accommodations they may need to perform the job well. You cannot ask questions like “*do you have a disability or mental health condition?*” or “*what medication(s) do you take?*” because these questions focus on personal health information, which is irrelevant to the candidate’s ability to do the job. You can ask questions that focus on a candidate’s ability to work, such as “*can you lift 20 pounds?*” or “*are you able to work on a flexible schedule?*”.

Offer accommodations to all candidates. During hiring, offering accommodations to all candidates can ensure that candidates are able to showcase their skills. Accommodations can also meet the needs of job seekers that are not aware they have a disability or may need adjustments for other reasons.

Proactively offering accommodations ensures that all candidates are aware of the available support and fosters a supportive culture in which candidates feel more comfortable discussing what they need to be most productive and effective in the workplace. You can create a description of the accommodations your organization is able to offer, include this description when communicating with candidates (e.g., when inviting them to a screening call or interview), and encourage candidates to reach out if the type of accommodation they need is not mentioned.

What are accommodations?

Accommodations are ***adjustments that help job seekers and employees be more productive, comfortable, and effective at work.***

Accommodations are usually **free or inexpensive**. Accommodations can benefit everyone, whether or not they have a disability.

Hiring accommodations are usually free to implement. Examples of accommodations during the hiring phase include:

- Sending a copy of interview questions in advance.
- Conducting the interview in a low-sensory stimulation environment (e.g., a quiet office).
- Conducting the interview in an accessible environment (e.g., ramp access) OR remotely.
- Turning on closed captioning during online interviews.
- Ensuring any documents shared are accessible (e.g., screen reader compatible, accessible fonts and colours, plain language text).
- Allow participants to bring support workers, sign-language interpreters, or translators during interviews.¹¹¹

You may become aware of accommodation needs during the interview or screening process. If a candidate struggles with understanding spoken questions, you could offer to repeat, rephrase, or provide the questions in written form. You can also pause and check if the candidates need accommodations to participate fully in the interview.¹¹² For example, you can say: *“Is there anything we can do to make this interview more comfortable for you, such as providing the interview questions in a written format or slowing down the pace of the questions? We want to make sure you have a full opportunity to showcase your skills and qualifications during this process.”*

It's important to be able to have a transparent dialogue during the hiring process...This is not to give people a leg up, but to [make it] equitable for everyone to participate in an interview. (Service provider)

Review your hiring process for barriers, using an accessible interview checklist. To make your hiring process more inclusive, you can review your hiring process to identify barriers that make it difficult for some candidates to showcase their skills.^{113,114,115} There are many accessible interview checklists available online that can help you during this process. These checklists break down each step of the interview process and provide guidelines on changes that you can make. Often, changes include providing accessible materials or online portals, standardizing your interview process, training hiring managers, and providing accommodations. Two examples of checklists that can help you identify areas for improvement are:

- [Accessible and Authentic Interviews for Candidates with Disabilities checklist](#)
- [Inclusive Interview Checklist](#)

¹¹¹ Inclusive Futures, n.d.

¹¹² JAN, n.d.

¹¹³ Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023.

¹¹⁴ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

¹¹⁵ Hire for Talent, n.d.

Diversify interview panels. Creating diverse interview panels allows candidates to be evaluated by individuals from different backgrounds and perspectives.¹¹⁶ Consider creating interview panels that include members from various seniority levels, demographic groups, and departments. Diverse interview panels can mitigate the impact of unconscious biases held by individuals. Allowing different panel members to ask questions can provide a deeper understanding of the candidate’s personal experiences and suitability for the role within the company.

Provide inclusive interviewing and disability awareness training to staff involved in hiring and consider standardizing interview processes. Implicit biases, misconceptions, and assumptions can influence hiring decisions. Hiring members that are not familiar with disability or are not trained in inclusive hiring techniques may discriminate against candidates without meaning to—or even noticing that they are doing it. Sometimes, when we expect a candidate to look or sound a certain way, we can miss out on candidates who are better suited for the position. To combat bias, you can provide disability inclusion training to all interviewers and hiring managers. This type of training helps them critically reflect on their perceptions of disability and its influence on their judgments.^{117,118} Another strategy is to use formal interview scripts and standardized questions to focus the discussion on the candidate’s qualifications rather than the interviewers’ impressions.¹¹⁹

Ensure interview questions assess candidates’ abilities to complete job tasks and responsibilities. To find the best candidate for the job, it is important that interview questions assess the candidate’s knowledge, experience, and ability to complete job tasks. However, many common interview questions are vague, conversational, or do not align with job tasks. In addition, some disabilities make it more difficult for people to respond to open-ended or indirect questions.¹²⁰

Are we interviewing for interview skills or for job skills? Because often we’re interviewing for interview skills. No where else in the world do we ask a 3-part question and expect a succinct answer within 3 min. What I mean is: ‘tell me about a time when...?; what did you do?; and what were the impacts?’ We never ask that [in] regular conversation, but we...evaluate that interview skill to see how you’ll be on the job. (Employer)

¹¹⁶ Thompson, 2021.

¹¹⁷ Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023.

¹¹⁸ Hire for Talent, n.d.

¹¹⁹ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

¹²⁰ Maras et al., n.d.

Review your interview questions to ensure they effectively and accurately gauge the candidate's ability to perform job-specific tasks. Focus on questions that assess relevant skills, experience, and knowledge directly related to the job's requirements. Avoid "trick questions" or unexpected surprises during the interview, as these can unfairly disadvantage certain candidates and do not provide a true measure of their capabilities. For further support reviewing your interview questions, you can look at examples online (e.g., [Adapting job interview questions for autistic candidates](#)) or contact a supported employment organization (an organization that helps people with disabilities find jobs) for feedback and advice.

Explore alternative interview formats. While traditional interviews are common, they are not always the best way to evaluate candidates' job performance. For many job positions, the qualities that help people perform well in interviews (e.g., small talk, and being extroverted) are not the same qualities they need to succeed at work.^{121,122} Exploring alternative interview formats can help you better assess candidates' suitability for the job.

Alternative formats can also be more inclusive for candidates with disabilities, as they provide different opportunities to showcase their skills. For example, to better support neurodivergent candidates, Microsoft conducts multiple days of "internship-like" assessments to allow candidates to demonstrate their technical and teamwork skills.¹²³ During this time, candidates also get a feel for daily experience of working at Microsoft. Other examples of alternative hiring assessments include:¹²⁴

- Casual face-to-face interview alternatives, such as half-day workplace hangouts.
- Opportunities to provide interview responses through phone, virtual, or in-person meetings or in written or pre-recorded formats.
- Assigned mock projects where candidates can demonstrate their skills through hands-on activities.
- Short (2-6 weeks) paid trial/training periods.

Collaborate with service providers, like supported employment organizations, to explore alternative hiring strategies and brainstorm accommodations. These organizations specialize in helping people with disabilities find work and can offer valuable guidance on inclusive recruitment practices. Contacting and working with service providers allows employers to explore alternative hiring approaches, tap into a diverse talent pool, and create accessible environments that support all candidates.

¹²¹ Inclusive Futures, n.d.

¹²² The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

¹²³ Kennedy, Jerdee, & Henneborn, 2019.

¹²⁴ Kennedy, Jerdee, & Henneborn, 2019.



CHAPTER 4: ONBOARDING

This section offers practical strategies to welcome new employees and guide organizations through the onboarding process with accessibility in mind.

Reviewing and updating your onboarding strategy can help you introduce expectations, responsibilities, and your organization’s culture to new staff. In turn, this helps new employees hit the ground running and get a productive start to work and can reduce unnecessary anxiety about the new position. The quality of the onboarding process is critical for all new employees, as it influences their confidence in their new roles, workplace engagement, job performance, and retention.¹²⁵ For staff with disabilities, inclusive practices, supports, and messaging during onboarding are a first step to ensuring they feel supported and understood. This can increase new employees’ comfort requesting and accessing any accommodations that will help them be their most productive and engaged at work. The following section details strategies to ensure a smooth start, thereby reducing future challenges and turnover later on.

¹²⁵ Sibisi and Kappers, 2022.

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS: ONBOARDING

Strong social-emotional skills can help managers successfully onboard new staff, foster productive working relationships between staff members, and create an environment where new employees feel welcome and are able to perform to the best of their abilities.

Skill	Example
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ During onboarding, share important information (e.g., to-do lists, instructions) both verbally and in writing. This can help new employees remember important information. ▪ Ask questions to confirm if new employees understand information. If needed, adjust your communication (e.g., speak slower, provide more examples, use less lingo). ▪ Make time to check in with and listen to new employees. Invite new employees to ask questions and demonstrate that you are listening (i.e., listen with your full attention).
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recognize new employees may behave or communicate a bit differently than you are used to. Take some time to learn about their strengths and needs. ▪ Explain the roles and responsibilities of different staff members to help new employees understand the team better. Let new employees know who they should talk to if they need help or have questions. ▪ Starting a new job is stressful! Support new employees by providing motivation and encouragement. Encourage staff members to give each other positive feedback.
Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ When possible, try to minimize distractions during onboarding to help new employees focus on learning (e.g., provide training in a calm environment). ▪ Set clear goals and expectations for new employees. What does success look like during the first weeks of work? How do new employees know if they are doing a good job? ▪ Be patient during the training process. Everyone learns at different speeds. Learn when you need to adapt training (e.g., explain something differently) and when you just need to give a little more time.
Creativity and Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Seek out new ideas for training and onboarding. How do other organizations onboard new employees? How can you create a better onboarding experience? ▪ Encourage new employees to make suggestions, experiment with new ways of doing things (when appropriate), and share creative ideas. Sometimes fresh eyes can spot areas for innovation and improvement! ▪ When trying new onboarding or training approaches, expect some failures. View failures as a part of the process, and opportunities for learning and improvement
Problem Solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Observe carefully to see if you can identify patterns or gaps in training and onboarding (e.g., do many new staff forget the same information)? ▪ Brainstorm multiple solutions to training and onboarding challenges. Select the best solution to address the challenge. ▪ After onboarding, spend some time reflecting on the process to identify areas to improve. What went well? What could be done better next time?

INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICES: ONBOARDING

The policies and practices below will help you better onboard new employees to ensure a strong start to work and to set the tone for a productive, positive working relationship. The practices are organized based on ease of implementation, with easier-to-implement practices listed first, followed by those that may require more time, effort, and resources. While these strategies in this section are widely considered best practices, they are not “one-size-fits-all”; every organization has different priorities, needs, and experience with inclusive employment. Using your knowledge of the inclusion concepts described in the introduction, you can tailor these approaches to better fit your specific needs. Supported employment organizations (organizations that help connect employers and job seekers with disabilities) can be an additional resource to help you tailor solutions to your organization’s needs. These organizations are often able to provide coaching and resources free of charge.

Overview of onboarding policies and practices

Create an organized, structured orientation for new employees.

Ensure onboarding materials are clear and accessible (e.g., using Universal Design and/or plain language).

Create clear channels of communication for new employees to share feedback on the onboarding process, accommodations, and the workplace environment.

Take the initiative to offer accommodations and collaborate with employees to create an accommodation plan.

Empower managers and supervisors to offer accommodations and flexibility to help new employees maximize productivity.

Set up support systems (e.g., peer support, employee resource groups).

Create an organized, structured orientation for new employees. Providing an onboarding schedule a few days in advance and avoiding last-minute changes can help all new employees feel confident and prepared and support employees with disabilities who may rely on planning.¹²⁶ Including information on transportation options, workplace conditions (e.g., temperature and noise levels or camera on/off expectations for virtual calls), and accessibility options (e.g., elevators or ramps, subtitles and notes provided after the meeting) can further help employees with disabilities prepare for a productive start to work.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Henneborn, 2021.

¹²⁷ Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, n.d.

Ensure onboarding materials are clear and accessible (e.g., using Universal Design and/or plain language). Where possible, ensure onboarding materials are presented in plain language or a reading level aligned with the task requirements of the job. Additionally, conduct an accessibility review to ensure documents meet accessibility requirements (e.g., colour contrast, font size, screen reader compatibility). Clearly indicate which materials are essential, and which are optional for employees to review. Offer employees the opportunity to review their contracts and onboarding materials with HR staff to support a thorough understanding of expectations, terms, and conditions of employment.¹²⁸

Create clear channels of communication for new employees to share feedback on the onboarding process, accommodations, and the workplace environment. A lack of clear communication between employers and employees about the accommodation process can negatively impact productivity and engagement.¹²⁹ You can improve communication with new employees by encouraging feedback and establishing communication channels (e.g., weekly or monthly meetings with supervisors). Allow employees to share their feedback about the onboarding process, including procedures related to obtaining or implementing accommodations. Ensure employees understand they can share negative or critical feedback without fear of retribution.¹³⁰

Take initiative to offer accommodations and collaborate with employees to create an accommodation plan. During onboarding, you can check in with new employees to see if they need any accommodations or flexibility to complete their work tasks effectively, efficiently, and comfortably. Remember, most accommodations are no- or low-cost. By offering accommodations to all new employees, without requiring disclosure of disability, you can reduce stigma around accessing accommodations and create a workplace environment where all employees feel that their needs are understood and valued. Employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations. However, finding the right accommodation to meet employees' needs can be a collaborative process. For example, if an employee requests to work from home full-time due to a health condition, after some discussion, you may find that the employee is willing and able to come to the office for client meetings or team events as needed, so long as advance notice is provided. Collaborating is most successful when you ask about employees' needs, are open to suggestions, and regularly check in on the effectiveness of the accommodations. During this collaboration, you can adopt a learning mindset. Recognize that employees with disabilities have the best understanding of what works for them.

The person who has the lived experience with a disability actually outranks you in their expertise when it comes to their experience and perhaps some of their accommodation. And what I mean by that is. There could be a thousand

¹²⁸ Inclusive Futures, n.d.

¹²⁹ Government of Canada, 2019b.

¹³⁰ Inclusive Futures, n.d.

solutions, but your [employee] sitting in front of you knows of the 3 that are gonna work. (Employer)

When employees do need accommodations, create individual accommodation plans that clearly document the accommodations provided, along with other pertinent information, such as workplace emergency procedures.¹³¹ Within 30 days of starting, confirm with new employees that their accommodation plan is effectively meeting their needs.¹³²

Empower managers and supervisors to offer accommodations and flexibility to help new employees maximize productivity. Support from upper-level management can go a long way to empowering supervisors and provide encouragement and examples of how managers can provide reasonable flexibility to adjust workplace processes. This allows new employees to bring creative ideas that may improve workplace processes, or to complete tasks in the way that is most efficient for them. Empowering supervisors and managers is particularly important, as research has found that more than half of employees (~60%) first disclose accommodation needs to their supervisor, rather than to HR staff.¹³³ Supervisors and managers may require resources or training on the accommodation employers are required to provide, organizational accommodation policies, and examples of accommodations that have been made in the past.

Start with: I'm here with you. I'm going to do my best. There might be some stumbles. We're gonna take an iterative approach. I'm here with infinite respect and we're gonna keep working on it until we're you're feeling great. (Employer)

Set up social support systems (e.g., peer support, employee resource groups). Social support is important to help employees learn unwritten workplace rules and integrate them into the workplace processes and culture. Social supports can include managers, a workplace “buddy system” where new employees are paired with experienced employees, or Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). Employees with disabilities may also benefit from support workers for their first weeks of employment, often provided at no cost by employment service providers. A mix of formal support and mentorship or buddy systems can significantly help employees integrate and succeed. ERGs, in particular, have been shown to increase the likelihood that employees will disclose their disability within the organization.¹³⁴ It is crucial to inform new employees about these resources in a timely manner, so they can access support during the first days and weeks of work.

¹³¹ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

¹³² Hire for Talent, n.d.

¹³³ JAN, n.d.

¹³⁴ Henneborn, 2021.



CHAPTER 5: RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT

This section offers practical strategies to support the career development and advancement of employees with disabilities with accessibility in mind.

By adopting strategies to support the ongoing wellbeing and engagement of employees, you can retain employees and reduce costly absenteeism (e.g., “quiet quitting”) and turnover. Many employers can overlook the crucial stages of retention and advancement when making workplace inclusivity changes.¹³⁵ Even after a successful hiring and onboarding process, employees’ needs may evolve, or employees may develop disabilities (the onset for many disabilities is later in life) that may benefit from accommodations. Additionally, providing opportunities for ongoing career development and advancement within the organization can also help retain employees, improve human capital and talent within the organization, and reduce hiring costs through internal promotions (rather than external hiring). For people with disabilities, employment success means having access to high-quality jobs offering income security, schedule flexibility, workplace safety, and opportunities for career growth.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Canadian Association for Supported Employment, 2022.

¹³⁶ Shahidi et al., 2023.

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS: RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT

Supporting employees at the retention and advancement stages is a continual process. Having managers and supervisors with strong social emotional skills can improve the workplace environment, reduce and effectively manage conflict, ensure staff continue to develop skills, and help employees continue to grow in their roles. For example, routine check-ins and performance reviews draw on core communication skills. Collaboration skills can help you improve teamwork and build employees' skills through mentoring. Using Adaptability skills, you can adjust to changes in employee's needs over time, reducing burnout. Table 12 provides more examples of how social emotional Skills for Success can be useful to retain and continually increase the capacity and competency of your employees.

Skill	Example
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussing current responsibilities, future growth opportunities, and potential career advancements with employees.
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with employees with disabilities to co-create unique career journeys, identify desired growth areas, and develop personalized learning paths. Empower employees to shape their own career trajectories. Recognize that these paths may not always be linear. Build a work environment where employees feel safe to voice their concerns. Encourage peer mentorship. Mentor employees to support their professional growth while learning from their insights and lived experiences.
Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapt the types and focus of professional development opportunities to help employees bridge skills gaps as they advance into new roles. Be flexible to changing requirements and needs. As employees' roles evolve (e.g., being promoted), adjust support options (e.g., help employees gain supervisory experience).
Creativity and Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuing to seek out ideas and inspirations from other companies, service providers, experts, etc. to increase organizational accessibility and inclusion. Engage in Community of Practice with like-minded employers to learn new and innovative inclusion practices. Create a culture of innovation. Embrace out-of-the-box ideas from employees with disabilities as well as those with unique lived experiences. View these ideas as opportunities to come up with new and innovative processes and practices.
Problem Solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep track of challenges, employee complaints, and turnover to identify trends and "sticky" points in your workplace environment or culture that could be improved. Identify patterns and trends in both positive areas (e.g., increasing employee satisfaction) and challenging areas (e.g., stressful business periods) to think about ways to improve.

INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICES: RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT

The policies and practices are organized into three sections: accommodations, advancement, and workplace environment. In each section, the practices are based on ease of implementation, with easier-to-implement practices listed first, followed by those that may require more time, effort, and resources. While these strategies in this section are widely considered best practices, they are not “one-size-fits-all”; every organization has different priorities, needs, and experience with inclusive employment. Using your knowledge of the inclusion concepts described in the introduction, you can tailor these approaches to better fit your specific needs. Supported employment organizations (organizations that help connect employers and job seekers with disabilities) can be an additional resource to help you tailor solutions to your organization’s needs. These organizations are often able to provide coaching and resources free of charge.

Overview of retention and advancement policies and practices

Theme	Policies and practices
Accommodations	Offer accommodations to all employees.
	Regularly check in to see if accommodation needs have changed.
	Create a predictable work environment.
	Offer flexible hours.
	Offer remote work options.
	Develop “return to work” plans for employees returning from leave.
Advancement	Provide accessible coaching and training opportunities.
	Outline transparent advancement criteria.
	Support career development and advancement for employees with disabilities.
	Ensure performance evaluations reflect the strengths of diverse employees.
Workplace environment	Create a psychologically safe workplace.
	Involve people with disabilities in developing policies and practices.
	Support diversity champions.
	Provide disability awareness training and information.
	Increase tracking of inclusion-related metrics and key performance indicators (KPIs).

Accommodations

Offer accommodations to all employees. Accommodations are tools or changes (e.g., flexible work schedule, new office chair, quiet workspace, using closed captions or taking meeting notes) that help employees perform their jobs more efficiently. Offering accommodations to all employees, regardless of disability, can normalize accommodations and ensure all staff have what they need to get their work done. In addition to boosting engagement and productivity, offering accommodations communicates that you value employees' wellbeing, which can help promote employee loyalty. When accommodation needs are not met, employees often report lower workplace engagement and satisfaction, which can lead to decreased productivity and increased absenteeism.^{137,138}

What an accommodation is, is trying to design or create a workaround for a poor job design. If I don't have the right keyboard, I'm slower, as in my productivity. [But] if you can get the right keyboard to me, I can be faster. Right? And just be more productive. We wanna make sure that people feel comfortable in asking. To say, hey, you know what, I would be more productive if we could look at another keyboard. (Employer)

Regularly check in to see if accommodation needs have changed. Offering accommodations is not a one-time task. The needs of employees with disabilities can change over time, or new needs may emerge. For example, some people with episodic disabilities might experience symptom changes that require adjustments to their accommodations (e.g., individuals with depression may have fluctuations in mood and energy levels). Ensure managers and supervisors periodically check in with employees and encourage employees to request required adjustments (e.g., to their workload, work schedule, and work tools) as their needs change. Be sure to update their accommodation plans if they report any changes.^{139,140,141}

Create a predictable work environment. Many employees with disabilities benefit from a predictable work environment (e.g., advance planning and scheduling). Notify employees about time-sensitive events, including meeting times and task deadlines, as early as possible. Avoid last-minute rescheduling or imposing sudden deadlines to ensure consistency and reliability in their planning.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Bonaccio et al., 2020.

¹³⁸ Lindsay et al., 2018.

¹³⁹ Hire for Talent, n.d.

¹⁴⁰ Inclusive Futures, n.d.

¹⁴¹ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

¹⁴² Henneborn, 2021.

Offer flexible hours. Flexible work hours can benefit many employees, including those with disabilities.^{143,144} Flexibility can allow employees to adjust their schedules to work when they are most productive (e.g., take longer breaks and work later, or shift work hours to avoid high-sensory environments like rush hour traffic). Many disabilities are episodic, which means the severity of the symptoms change over time. Flexibility can allow employees to adjust workloads or schedules as needed and avoid burnout or unnecessary turnover. Of course, there is a need to balance flexibility with job requirements to ensure work is being completed efficiently. You can work collaboratively with employees to find solutions that ensure they are completing work (e.g., are available for meetings, and meet deadlines) while also providing flexibility where possible.

Offer remote work options. Similarly, you can consider offering job positions that are hybrid or fully remote. Remote work is often more accessible for employees with disabilities. When working remotely, employees have more control over their sensory environment (e.g., noise, temperature), can avoid stress or distractions related to working in-office, and face fewer barriers related to physical inaccessibility of the workspace (e.g., lack of ramps) or transit to work. When possible, offer the option of working from home, either as a long-term solution or on an as-needed basis.

Develop “return to work” plans for employees returning from leave. In cases where employees need to take a leave of absence (e.g., due to injury, illness, or personal circumstances), create a “return to work” policy to support successful re-entry into the workplace. Return-to-work plans can also help to reduce injury, prevent relapse and improve employees’ productivity in the long run.¹⁴⁵ If the employee agrees, maintain contact during employees’ leave of absence to ensure they receive adequate support. Collaboratively develop a clear return-to-work plan with the employee and any involved care professionals, tailoring it to their recovery and accommodation needs.^{146,147}

Advancement

Provide accessible coaching and training opportunities. Just like other employees, employees with disabilities benefit from coaching and support to progress in their careers. Ensure that training and professional development opportunities are offered equally to employees with disabilities and those without disabilities and that the opportunities are accessible for employees with diverse needs.

¹⁴³ Inclusive Futures, n.d.

¹⁴⁴ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

¹⁴⁵ Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2022.

¹⁴⁶ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

¹⁴⁷ Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2022.

People often assume – especially with those with development or cognitive disabilities – that they will stay in an entry level position and be happy there. It’s not always the case. It’s important to have conversations about goals, professional development, growth just as you would with other employees – never assume what they want to do or can do. Many people with these kinds of disabilities have never had someone career plan or help them think of how to progress in their careers. (Employer)

Outline transparent advancement criteria. Ensure that all employees, including people with disabilities, clearly understand what is required for advancement within the organization (e.g., specific criteria for promotions). Transparency around promotion decisions demonstrates fairness, prevents perceptions of bias, and ensures that employees with disabilities are equitably considered for advancement.

Support career development and advancement for employees with disabilities. Offer employees with disabilities roles that include a clear and fulfilling path for career advancement. When adjusting roles to accommodate disabilities (e.g., job carving), carefully assess how these modifications may affect traditional advancement paths. If necessary, develop alternative career paths to ensure these employees have equitable opportunities for progression. This ensures that accommodations made for disabilities do not support a trajectory that aligns with their capabilities and career aspirations, rather than limiting their opportunities for professional development.

They're going to have the same coaching conversations as everyone else. They'll have the same...accountability and objectives as everyone else. Of course, yes, we can modify some according to accommodations as needed. But ... we're not going to limit your expectation or our belief of your capabilities. (Employer)

Ensure performance evaluations reflect the strengths of diverse employees. Standard or traditional performance reviews can advantage employees and miss the strengths of disabled or neurodiverse employees. Review performance evaluations to ensure they are aligned with the essential job tasks and reflect any modifications made to job tasks for employees with disabilities (e.g., job carving). Additionally, ensure strengths and potential growth areas of employees are reflected. For example, if an employee excels in detail-oriented tasks and shows high levels of concentration and accuracy, the performance review should reflect these strengths.¹⁴⁸ As another example, if an employee with arthritis has difficulty with tasks requiring fine motor skills, evaluate their performance based on their overall contributions and quality of work and adapt their role or provide assistive tools rather than penalizing them for slower performance in specific tasks.

¹⁴⁸ Aichner, 2021.

Workplace environment

Create a psychologically safe workplace. A psychologically safe workplace is a work environment where employees feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks, contributing ideas, asking questions, and expressing concerns without worrying about any negative consequences to their job, career, psychological, or physical health.^{149,150} Psychologically safe workplaces support the well-being of staff, as well as productivity, retention, and engagement¹⁵¹. A psychologically safe work environment can look like:

- Employees feel safe to inquire about needed accommodations without worrying about negative consequences.¹⁵²
- Employees feel comfortable to share productive disagreements, openly seek feedback and discuss them as learning opportunities.¹⁵³
- Offer feedback in a supportive, strength-based, and growth-oriented manner.¹⁵⁴
- The organization provides access to mentoring programs, implements mental health initiatives, could provide support to address workplace challenges.^{155,156}

Creating that safe space can really make a difference. The engagement scores go way up. Productivity goes way up. The idea shares go – the ideas that they share – go way up. And when a people manager creates a psychologically safe space for a team everybody feels more engaged. (Employer)

Involve people with disabilities in developing policies and practices. Directly involving people with disabilities when developing policies and practices related to disability inclusion improves the quality and relevance of new policies. Additionally, including their voices can mitigate biases and ensure direct learning from people with lived experience. Consider creating voluntary working groups of employees with disabilities to provide recommendations and review proposed changes to policies, ensuring that they are compensated for their time and effort (e.g., given work hours to complete tasks). Ensure that the suggestions of staff with disabilities are given weight and considered in the decision-making process. By giving employees with

¹⁴⁹ Newman, Donohue & Eva, 2017.

¹⁵⁰ Maximo, Stander, & Coxen, 2019.

¹⁵¹ Burke, 2019.

¹⁵² Newman, Donohue & Eva, 2017.

¹⁵³ Edmondson & Lei, 2014.

¹⁵⁴ Franken, Plimmer, & Malinen, 2023.

¹⁵⁵ Newman, Donohue & Eva, 2017.

¹⁵⁶ Bonde et al., 2023.

disabilities real decision-making power, you can avoid tokenism (e.g., including people from equity-deserving groups without sharing actual power or influence).¹⁵⁷

Provide all employees with disability awareness training (and other forms of diversity and inclusion training). Consider providing disability inclusion training to all employees, and not just those who might be directly involved in the accommodation process.¹⁵⁸ Offering disability awareness training can help employees better work alongside employees with disabilities, improving social cohesion and teamwork. For example, one employer shared how training helped reduce friction between employees:

We had an intern that was training with us that had some social communication challenges. They needed a really direct cue when a conversation was over, or they would follow people around and pursue them to continue the conversation. Some people were great and being able to just clearly say “talking is over, going back to work now”. But not everyone is, and there is a need for some training of other staff. Because this person had a lot to contribute as a staff member but had some support needs. (Employer)

As well as disability-specific training, including diversity and inclusion training focusing on other marginal identities helps to address the intersection of identities recognizing that people with disabilities may belong to multiple underrepresented groups simultaneously, each with unique challenges and experiences. Many people with disabilities face additional barriers and discrimination, which can intensify accessibility challenges in the workplace. For example, workplace racism and discrimination can act as additional barriers that prevent racialized and Indigenous employees with disabilities (BIPOC-D) from requesting or receiving accommodations.¹⁵⁹ Training that explores how diverse identity characteristics and experiences can shape workplace experiences can help your staff identify and reduce barriers. Additionally, ensure that all employees are aware of the steps your organization is taking to include people with disabilities.

Support diversity champions. Often, organizational change is driven by the efforts of a few employees who are passionate about diversity-related issues—diversity champions. Champions play an important role in promoting a more inclusive workplace culture by advocating for change, leading inclusion initiatives, and supporting employees. Employees with disabilities often take on—or are pushed into—the role of “champions” for diversity efforts. However, champions often take on this role in addition to their existing work, contributing to burnout and

¹⁵⁷ Camargo, 2023.

¹⁵⁸ Cordano, 2022.

¹⁵⁹ Canadian Association for Supported Employment, 2022.

a high turnover. In addition, when champions leave the organization, it can lead to a loss of knowledge or momentum.

It is important to support diversity champions. Ensure champions are provided resources (e.g., time, compensation), support, and recognition for their efforts. Additionally, distribute the responsibility of inclusion throughout teams and employees, and empower all employees to take responsibility for creating a more inclusive culture.¹⁶⁰

There's fatigue due to the high turnover in this space. When a champion from the hiring, onboarding, or advancement of employees in different divisions or D&I leaves, and [their replacement] doesn't have the same commitment or historical knowledge, creating challenges for those promised supports like job accommodation. The continuity of such champions is really important. (Service provider)

Increase tracking of inclusion-related metrics and KPIs. Adopt a data-driven approach to evaluate the effectiveness of your disability policies and practices. This can include employee surveys and requesting direct feedback on aspects of the companies' policies. It can also involve employment metrics for people with disabilities and employees from other under-represented groups (e.g., application rates, hiring rates, pay, performance reviews, promotion rates). Analyzing this data can help you to identify disparities for different groups of employees and identify areas where organizational biases may be disadvantaging employees. While finding disparities may feel discouraging, identifying challenge areas is an important step towards change. Collecting information can help you make targeted change and track your progress over time.

¹⁶⁰ The Conference Board of Canada, 2015.

CONCLUSION

The journey to inclusive employment is an ongoing learning process. Employers that make progress and actively engage in this inclusion work often see the rewards in the form of increased productivity and engagement of their workforce. This document provided an overview of policies and practices, as well as overarching principles—such as creating and employee-centred workplace culture and upskilling the social emotional skills of your management staff—that can support you as you increase the inclusivity and accessibility of your workplace for people with disabilities. As you continue this process, you may learn from your colleagues with disabilities and other experts to discover new practices, approaches, and strategies that will help you to create a supportive environment for all employees.

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APPENDIX A: UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Universal Design is the intentional design of products, environments, and systems so that they are accessible and usable for everyone, regardless of their abilities and disabilities, background (e.g., age, first language), and characteristics.¹⁶² Incorporating Universal Design principles in your workplace allows you to create physical and virtual environments, policies, and resources that benefit all employees.¹⁶³ Through Universal Design, you can address **intersectional** needs (needs that emerge from individuals' background, characteristics, and lived experience).¹⁶⁴ For example, writing documents in plain language accommodates employees with disabilities related to reading, cognition, or taking information (e.g., Dyslexia); it also accommodates employees that don't have English as a first language. As another example, providing flexible working hours can support employees with disabilities and also benefit working parents or employees working multiple jobs.

Intersectionality is a framework that recognizes the interconnected nature of various social identities (such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability) and explores how these overlapping factors shape individual experiences.¹⁶¹

The seven principles of Universal Design are described below, with the bolded text taken directly from the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design principles, followed by examples.¹⁶⁵

Equitable Use: The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities. For example, developing a user-friendly website benefits everyone regardless of their digital skills, familiarity with technology, age, language abilities, or disability.

Flexibility in Use: The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities. For instance, developing onboarding tools with visual examples (e.g., screenshots), written instructions, and video demos to meet the needs of employees with multiple learning styles or disabilities.

Simple and Intuitive Use: Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. For example, writing

¹⁶¹ Crenshaw, 1989.

¹⁶² Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2024.

¹⁶³ Canadian Association for Supported Employment, 2024.

¹⁶⁴ Crenshaw, 1989.

¹⁶⁵ Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2024.

company policies or instructions in plain language documents with minimal jargon, so that they are clear and easy to understand for new hires as well as experienced employees.

Perceptible Information: The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities. For example, enabling closed captions in online meetings to meet the needs of employees that have challenges with auditory processing or memory, or prefer to have a written transcript for other reasons.

Tolerance for Error: The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions. For example, features such as auto-save can benefit all users by reducing frustration and improving efficiency.

Low Physical Effort: The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue. For example, workstations with adjustable height desks not only benefit individuals with physical disabilities but also enhance comfort, focus, and productivity for all employees.

Size and Space for Approach and Use: Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility. For example, ensure environments such as conference rooms that are built to accommodate individuals using mobility aids such as wheelchairs or walkers. This can benefit all users as it allows for freer movement during meetings, promoting interaction and collaboration among employees.

These principles can be applied to increase the accessibility of your workplace policies, workplace environment (both virtual and physical), onboarding resources, training programs, and more.

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