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Career Mobility of People with Disabilities

Final Report

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INTRODUCTION

This project aimed to fill a knowledge gap on the experiences of people with disabilities with respect to career mobility. It was conducted in support of advancing the Government of Canada's Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities and Disability Inclusion Action Plan. The project included a literature review and interviews with stakeholders such as employment service providers, experts, career practitioners, employers, and people with disabilities. It drew on both Canadian and international studies and applied a Gender-based Analysis Plus (or intersectional) lens to capture the intersections between disabilities, gender, and race.

According to the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability, over six million Canadians aged 15 years or over live with at least one disability that impacts their ability to carry out activities in their day-to-day lives (Statistics Canada, 2018). People with disabilities experience greater social, economic, and health disparities compared to those living without a disability (Cutean, 2018; Iezzoni, 2011; Iezzoni et al., 2021; Tompa et al., 2020). Further, many people with disabilities experience barriers to meaningful employment, and once employed, face challenges due to social stigma, lack of accommodation, and limited opportunities for advancement (CCHR, 2019). In addition to the financial benefits, employment is critical for fostering the social inclusion of people with disabilities in Canadian society (CCHR, 2019). Being employed can promote good mental health, offer a place to socialize, help develop interpersonal contacts, and provide an opportunity to apply one's skills and gain a sense of personal accomplishment and self-esteem (CCHR, 2019).

There are many definitions of career mobility in the literature depending on the focus of the research. For the literature review, career mobility was defined as intra- and inter-organizational job transitions over the duration of a person's career (Feldman & Ng, 2007; Hall, 1996; Sullivan, 1999). As suggested by this definition, job transitions can take a variety of forms. For example, Ng (2007) differentiates between job change, organizational change, and occupational change within the context of status mobility (upward, lateral, downward). Career mobility for this review is interpreted as a positive concept, describing how employees change positions or roles to obtain greater job fulfillment.

People with disabilities face a complex array of social, occupational, and individual-level barriers to career mobility (e.g., Braddock & Bachelder, 1994; Kulkarni, 2012; Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014; Samosh, 2019). This includes, for example, stereotypes and stigma related to the performance of people with disabilities, costs associated with accommodations, and negative perceptions and actions from co-workers, managers, and customers. In terms of occupational barriers, people with disabilities are overrepresented in entry-level and semi-skilled positions that are often characterized by part-time hours, subsistence-level pay, low skill-level

requirements, and limited advancement opportunities. Lifelong experiences of discrimination can also contribute to people with disabilities exhibiting self-limiting behaviours, including lacking the confidence they need to pursue advancement opportunities, advocating for necessary supports, and signaling their interest in – and the ability for – advancement (Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014).

When describing the context of career mobility, it is also important to emphasize that people with disabilities are not a homogenous group. Social identities (e.g., race, gender, and sexuality) as well as disability types and severities can greatly influence the experiences of people with disabilities with respect to their career advancement. Although there is very little research on how identity and disability type influence the career mobility of people with disabilities specifically, there is evidence on how these factors influence the employment outcomes of people with disabilities more generally (e.g., employment status, income) (Beatty et al., 2018; Boucher, 2017).

The study of career mobility is thus critical for understanding the barriers that people with disabilities face in career advancement, as well as the supports that lead to greater job fulfillment. Research on career mobility, however, is not only important from human rights and equity perspectives but also from an economic perspective in terms of maintaining high employment rates (Eichhorst et al., 2010). In particular, career mobility is critical to organizations for effective human resource planning and skill development and societies in terms of the diffusion of knowledge, innovation, and technology (Eichhorst et al., 2010).

Although there has been extensive research on the career mobility of the general population, focusing on equal opportunity and movement across class boundaries (Kalleberg & Mouw, 2018), research on the career mobility of people with disabilities is much more limited (Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014). The more extensive body of literature on disability and employment focuses primarily on addressing barriers and supports for obtaining or maintaining employment, rather than how career mobility can enhance employment outcomes. This report aims to contribute to a greater understanding of the challenges faced by people with disabilities with respect to career mobility, as well as how policies, programs, and services can best support people with disabilities in their employment journey.

This report is organized as follows: section one outlines the research objectives and methodology, section two provides a brief overview of career mobility, section three discusses key barriers and facilitators to career mobility, section four outlines career advancement interventions, and section five provides overall conclusions and considerations for future research.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this project was to contribute to a greater understanding of the challenges faced by people with disabilities related to career mobility, as well as how policies, programs, and services can best support people with disabilities in their employment journey. It was conducted to determine the extent to which evidence exists to address the project's key research questions:

1. How does the career mobility of people with disabilities compare to people without disabilities in Canada? How does Canada compare to other countries?
2. What are the impacts of the lack of career mobility on people with disabilities, employers, and the Canadian labour market?
3. What are the main barriers faced by people with disabilities to career mobility in Canada? What could be done to address these barriers and by whom (employers, governments, etc.)?
4. What are some best practices and promising practices in Canada, and internationally that would apply to a Canadian context, to increase the career mobility of people with disabilities?
5. What are the knowledge gaps related to the career mobility of people with disabilities and how can these gaps be addressed?
6. How are the challenges faced by people with disabilities compounded by other social identities and life factors?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review included the following components:

- A review of domestic and international peer-reviewed and grey literature to develop an understanding of the current status, challenges, trends, and emerging practices related to career mobility for people with disabilities;
- A focus on the Canadian context, but also includes some international comparisons; and
- English language sources, the majority of which have been published in the last five years.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with a small group of stakeholders focusing on the key themes identified in the literature review. The interview findings were then integrated with the literature review to confirm or address gaps in the evidence. It should be emphasized that, due to the limited number of interviews conducted for this project, the views reported in this section are not intended to be representative of broader stakeholder groups in the disability community, particularly in terms of the diversity of experiences of people with disabilities. Nevertheless, the views presented below provide a starting point for understanding the range of experiences as well as the challenges and opportunities faced by people with disabilities related to the pursuit of their career objectives.

A total of 13 interviews were conducted within the following stakeholder categories (some interviewees belong to more than one category):

- 6 people with lived experience of disability;
- 4 career service providers/career practitioners;
- 3 employers;
- 6 experts (academic and advocacy).

SRDC prepared the interview protocols in consultation with ESDC, conducted the interviews, and analyzed the qualitative data for inclusion in the project report. Interviewees were identified through SRDC's employer and practitioner networks and relationships with organizations that serve people with disabilities. Honorariums were provided for people with disabilities who participated in the interviews.

BACKGROUND ON CAREER MOBILITY AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Before outlining the evidence on the relationship between career mobility and disability, it is important to first highlight the current Canadian context in terms of the employment rights of people with disabilities. In Canada, the employment rights of people with disabilities, including those related to career advancement, are enshrined in the Canadian Human Rights Act, provincial and territorial human rights codes and employment law, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (CHRC, 2022). As well, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)¹ has played a key role in shaping Canadian constitutional and statutory protections for people with disabilities, as well as legislative, administrative, and other measures.

The following are the key areas of Canadian legislation that protect the rights of people with disabilities related to employment:

- The Canadian Human Rights Act (1985) protects Canadians from discrimination, including people with disabilities (CHRC, 2022).
- The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms applies to all government actions and guarantees all individuals fundamental freedoms and rights, including an explicit equality rights guarantee for people with disabilities.
- Federal, territorial, and provincial human rights laws prohibit discrimination on grounds such as disability in relation to employment; the provision of goods, services, and facilities customarily available to the public; and accommodation.
- Federal and provincial employment legislation provides for basic workplace rights.
- The Employment Equity Act (1995) aims to eliminate barriers to equity for disadvantaged groups, to ensure all Canadians have the same access to the labour market.

¹ UNCRPD was adopted in 2006, and as of 2022 it has 185 ratifications and 164 signatories, including Canada (UN, 2022).

- Workplace safety/workers' compensation legislation provides for occupational health and safety and workplace disability insurance.
- The Accessible Canada Act (2019) aims to make Canada barrier-free by January 1, 2040, including addressing barriers to employment for people with disabilities (CHRC, 2022).
- Accessibility Standards Canada's mandate is to support the implementation of the Accessible Canada Act (2019) by developing accessibility standards, advancing accessibility research, and sharing information related to accessibility. One of the standards currently in development is on employment, which includes, but is not limited to:
 - Information and awareness about available accommodations and training
 - Finding and keeping a job
 - Seeking workplace accommodations
 - Career and job development

The goal of this standard is to address barriers related to both individual actions and systems. It envisions a work environment that is accessible, inclusive, and barrier-free, regardless of a worker's (dis) abilities. This standard will have far-reaching implications for federally regulated businesses across Canada in terms of employment policy and practices. A draft of this standard is currently available for public review and is scheduled to be published in the summer of 2024 (Accessibility Standards Canada, n.b.).

DEFINING CAREER MOBILITY

Career mobility can be defined in a number of different ways depending on the focus of analysis. For the purposes of the literature review, career mobility was defined as intra- and inter-organizational job transitions over the duration of an individual's career. However, it became clear early on in the interview process that stakeholders took a much broader view of career mobility. Generally speaking, interviewees defined career mobility as the ability to move from one job to another without being trapped in a position that did not meet an individual's personal needs. This could include changing jobs within the same organization or moving to another organization. However, some interviewees also focused on other aspects of career mobility, such as professional development, career development, and personal development, as factors that are critical to an individual's ability to pursue a meaningful career.

To further highlight the above conception of career mobility, some interviewees made a distinction between having a career and having a job. As one interviewee noted, "I see a career as something with a trajectory. I see a job as a way of simply earning an income." Overall,

interviewees emphasized that a career involves the thoughtful and purposeful pursuit of fulfilling employment based on an overarching interest or fit with qualifications and circumstances. On the other hand, a job was described as simply being employed no matter how well the position fits the needs of the individual and whether or not it offers longer-term career opportunities. For these interviewees, therefore, career mobility means more than just getting a job or “ticking a box”, but rather an individual’s evolving and long-term interests and needs related to their potential career path. As one interviewee noted:

“I think career mobility [...] is so meaningful in that you can really start to ask questions about like, not what is this [employment] statistic, but what does this individual actually want?”

During the interviews, a service provider also emphasized that there is a need to look beyond simple employment statistics and performance measures that only track whether someone is employed or not. Rather, they noted that it is important to understand an individual’s evolving needs and desires related to advancing in their career.

In addition to taking a broader understanding of career mobility, interviewees described and emphasized the diversity of experiences among people with disabilities related to pursuing their career goals. Both the literature and interviews emphasized that people with disabilities are not a homogenous group but are extremely diverse in terms of their personal identities, experiences of disability, and employment pathways. Although this project involved a small number of interviews, the findings nevertheless demonstrate some of the diverse ways in which individuals pursue their career goals. For example, some interviewees recalled not following a ‘typical’ career path, such as working in entry-level jobs that teenagers often pursue to build experience. Rather, these respondents described how they focused on education as the main pathway to obtaining a job:

“[As] a kid in high school you go work at the grocery store, get some work experience that way. I wasn't able to do those manual labour jobs that young adults would do at that age, so [...] my family's ethos was your education and your brain is going to be what gets you your job.”

Other interviewees described how they made a transition from non-disability-related fields into disability-related careers. For example, certain interviewees obtained employment in a disability or accessibility-related position with a larger employer, while others started their own disability-related businesses. All of these interviewees noted that they are passionate about supporting people with disabilities through their work and that they are generally satisfied with their careers in the disability field. However, several participants also acknowledged that they previously had a limited interest in working in the disability field and that they were pushed into these roles due to previous negative employment experiences or challenges finding other types of

positions. Additionally, some interviewees noted a fear of being pigeon-holed into disability-related fields, and what they perceived as limited opportunities for advancement in smaller, disability-related organizations. As one interviewee noted, although someone with a disability may be able to advance in a disability-related field due to their lived experience, they may not have the same career mobility if they try to leave this field even if they have a strong skill set. An interview respondent working in academia noted:

“They describe their disability, as they call it, as a double-edged sword. When they stay in a disability-related field, they can actually advance and do quite well because lived experience is seen as a positive. But once they try to leave the service provider/disability-focused space, even though they have all the skills, they can't get a job, they can't move up the ladder.”

Interviewees also described differences in experiences based on disability type. For example, an interview subject with an acquired disability noted having to change career paths as a result of their disability. Further, other interviewees noted that people with congenital disabilities can often face more discrimination than people with acquired disabilities. People with acquired disabilities are more likely to have established careers or at least some work experience and, therefore, greater connections to colleagues and workplaces. These connections tend to lead to more positive career experiences, including obtaining the accommodations that they need to be successful in their career.

EVIDENCE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISABILITY AND CAREER MOBILITY

The following section provides an overview of the existing evidence on the relationship between disability and career mobility. Overall, the available literature provides strong indication that people with disabilities experience greater challenges in career advancement and mobility than those without disabilities (Bertin et al., 2016; Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Kulkarni, 2012; Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014) and that this has increased in recent years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Flick & McManus, 2022). However, there has been very limited research conducted on the topic in Canada and the few quantitative studies conducted in the United States are limited by their small sample sizes. The evidence provided below, therefore, does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the career advancement experiences of people with disabilities. Rather, this report provides a summary of what evidence was found with particular attention paid to the barriers and facilitators of career mobility for people with disabilities.

In terms of Canadian evidence, the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability found that almost half (45.6%) of people with disabilities reported that their disability makes it difficult to change or advance in their job (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2019). Similarly, a more recent

survey conducted by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (2022) that included a purposeful sample (i.e., not representative of the Canadian population) of people with lived experience of disability found that 72 per cent of respondents stated that it was difficult to advance in their jobs. In terms of comparisons between disabled and non-disabled people, a separate study conducted on federal public servants in Canada found that people with disabilities experienced lower promotion rates than people without disabilities (PSCC, 2022). The gap in promotion rates was largest in BC, with 8.9 per cent of people with disabilities obtaining a promotion compared to 12.1 per cent of people without disabilities (PSCC, 2022). Lower promotion rates were found in the administrative support and scientific/professional categories, whereas a higher rate of promotion was found in the operational category² (PSCC, 2022). People with disabilities were also less likely to apply for promotion opportunities and to get promoted as they got older (PSCC, 2022).

In terms of research conducted in the United States, a study on civil service employees of the United States Air Force Logistics Command found that people with disabilities were less successful in terms of promotions per year, supervisory ratings, awards, and salary. On the other hand, the study found that people with disabilities had longer work tenure and more formal education (Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014; Bressler & Lacy, 1980). An American study involving veterans who had experienced injuries found that physical limitations were likely to hinder or eliminate entirely, the opportunity for career advancement (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). The study found that those facing such trauma-induced career transitions were more likely to be pushed into entrepreneurship due to the challenges that they experienced transitioning to new employment (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). A similar study was conducted of 1,076 18-year-old male army recruits in the Israeli military, of which 237 were identified as having a learning disability (Luria et al., 2014 in Samosh, 2019). These soldiers completed commander training and entered leadership roles at a lower rate than soldiers without learning disabilities.

A survey conducted by the United States Department of Health and Human Services identified a relationship between disability status and employee perceptions of opportunities for career mobility (Randolph, 2005). The study found that 62 per cent of respondents without disabilities reported opportunities for career mobility compared to 51 per cent of respondents with disabilities (Randolph, 2005). Another study in the United States demonstrated that even when educational attainment was considered, workers with disabilities were found to be disproportionately relegated to entry-level positions and were underrepresented in higher-status or higher-paid occupations (Kaye, 2009). The disability rate was more than twice as high for entry-level occupations than for those requiring more than four years of experience (Kaye,

² The Operational Category includes: CX – Correctional Services, FB – Border Services, FR – Firefighters, GL – General Labour and Trades, GS – General Services, HP – Heat, Power and Stationary Plant Operation, HS – Hospital Services, LI – Lightkeepers, PR – Printing Operations, SC – Ships' Crews, SR – Ship Repair.

2009). Another American study found that nearly half of people with disabilities reported being overqualified for their positions (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Many interviewees also reported being routinely bypassed or discouraged from taking promotions (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

People with disabilities have also been shown to be laid off at a higher rate than people without disabilities. An American study conducted by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2008 in Samosh, 2019) found that the number of promotions for people with disabilities decreased by 25.19 per cent from 2002 to 2006 compared to only 3.99 per cent among people without disabilities. This decline may be due to people with disabilities being more likely to be laid off before non-disabled workers during an economic decline (Samosh, 2019).

In terms of long-term changes, a study involving biographical interviews with participants with disabilities who had entered the workforce in different decades (1950s, 1970s, and 1990s cohorts) found that although career mobility had improved over time, there was still much progress to be made (Coleman-Fountain et al., 2018). In particular, women with disabilities have become less likely to have to leave the workforce or slow their employment trajectory due to parenthood, representing a positive change (Coleman-Fountain et al., 2018). Participants who entered the workforce in the 1990s also described higher levels of choice and control in their careers than cohorts who began working in the 1950s and 1970s (Coleman-Fountain et al., 2018).

Not all studies, however, have identified a positive statistical correlation between disability and career mobility. For example, Schur et al. (2009 in Samosh, 2019) reported a significant negative relationship between disability and average pay, job security, and training. Although the study identified a negative relationship between employee disability and promotion, this association was not statistically significant. Further, a study using the US General Social Survey that included survey respondents with and without visual, hearing, mobility, and mental disabilities found that the relationship between disability status and promotion was also not statistically significant (Schur et al., 2017 in Samosh, 2019).

Race and gender also play a key role in understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with career mobility. Maroto et al. (2019) note that social categories act upon each other in myriad ways:

“Disability intersects with race and gender to expand the accumulation of disadvantage, shaping everything from educational attainment to the kinds of jobs people have, the neighbourhoods in which they live, their access to credit markets and social services, and their health over the life course,” (p. 65).

Research demonstrates that even after controlling for factors such as qualifications and performance, marginalized populations experience career disadvantages such as lower chances of promotion (Yap & Konrad, 2009 in Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014). For example, women or racialized people face lower expectations and have to work harder to prove their performance

(Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014). They are also less likely to be rewarded for their effort or ability, which is more likely to be attributed to external factors such as help from others or luck.

In summary, although the research reviewed above involves a small number of studies that are limited in scope, it does provide some evidence of the relationship between disability and career mobility. Larger studies that examine career mobility outcomes based on disability type and severity, as well as various identity factors (e.g., gender, race and sexuality), would provide a better understanding of the diverse experiences of people with disabilities with respect to their opportunities for advancing or changing careers.

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO CAREER MOBILITY

The following section discusses the barriers and facilitators to career mobility for people with disabilities. As described earlier, although it is well recognized in the literature that people with disabilities face significant barriers to employment (SRDC, 2022), there is limited research that specifically focuses on barriers and facilitators related to career advancement. Nonetheless, the barriers and facilitators that have been highlighted in the literature focus on (1) occupational issues; (2) discrimination; (3) disclosure and accommodations; (4) social networks; (5) employment services; (6) self-limiting behaviours; and (7) access to education.

OCCUPATIONAL ISSUES

There are several studies from Canada and other countries that document the extent to which people with disabilities can experience more difficulty entering higher-skilled occupations and tend to be relegated to lower-skilled, irregular, and part-time positions with limited opportunities for career advancement (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994; Coleman-Fountain et al., 2018; Moore & Huberty, 2020; Shin et al., 2022; Samosh, 2019; Shahidi et al., 2023). These lower-quality positions tend to be reflected by longer hours, an irregular and/or unpredictable schedule, gig work, and skill mismatch (Shahidi et al., 2023). They can also lack a flexible schedule, training opportunities, a positive safety climate, union membership, and pension benefits (Shahidi et al., 2023). Shahidi et al. (2023) found that people with disabilities tended to experience all of these undesirable employment qualities more often than people without disabilities.

Similarly, Braddock and Bachelder (1994) document how people with disabilities are more likely to be employed in blue-collar, clerical, or technical positions and less likely to have administrative or professional positions than people without disabilities. As shown by Tompa et al. (2020), these lower-skilled, lower-education jobs are also often at risk of automation, reducing overall opportunities for advancement. Many of the jobs most high risk for automation are routine-based and sales and services oriented, such as personal and customer information services, retail trades, and accommodation and food services (Tompa et al., 2020).

According to a study conducted by CASE (2022), racialized people with disabilities were particularly likely to be systematically limited to lower-paying, lower-skilled, and temporary survival jobs which were often short-term contracts, unpredictable, and unsafe (CASE, 2022). Older workers and new job seekers with disabilities were found to face particularly high levels of

precarious employment, with 42 per cent of survey respondents in this study indicating that they were working in jobs that did not reflect their education and training (CASE, 2022). As shown by Wilson et al. (2011) people with disabilities who work in survival jobs tend to make professional sacrifices, such as accepting any available job rather than pursuing a career-oriented position.

There has been some research that has demonstrated the relationship between the skill level of a job and the type and severity of disability. For example, a study among nine European countries that involved interviews with individuals with disabilities found that people with intellectual impairments were more likely to have started work in sheltered workshop settings.³ This was contrasted with individuals with visual or mobility impairments, who were more likely to find employment in the local labour market, and therefore, had a better ability to move between jobs in the open market (Coleman-Fountain et al., 2018).

Interviewees for this project also described how stigmas and stereotypes contribute to people with disabilities working in entry-level jobs for longer than people without disabilities, often with limited or no opportunities for advancement. This is often due to issues relating to a lack of accommodations and employees' wariness in communicating accommodation needs to supervisors or managers (which is discussed in greater detail below). Additionally, interviewees shared their perception that many employers and service providers believe that people with disabilities are happy to just have a job and may not want to pursue a long-term career given the level of effort and risk involved. As one interviewee noted:

“There's this fear that they might not get another one [job], they might not get another chance. Somebody has finally been open to hiring them, you know, and they just feel so kind of maybe lucky or grateful or just afraid to leave that they might not be accepted somewhere else because there is, you know, discrimination and stigma and stereotypes and prejudice is huge.”

Some interviewees also noted that, although service jobs seem to be the most available to people with disabilities, they can be difficult and inaccessible for people with physical disabilities. Office workspaces may also be inaccessible, such as desks that are not adapted to wheelchairs. Furthermore, in some industries, expectations of long work hours can be a barrier for some people with disabilities who may experience fatigue or whose physical function is significantly reduced by fatigue:

“I ended up doing really well [with my job], but for a variety of reasons, I decided to step away from broadcasting. When you start out in broadcasting,

³ According to People First of Canada, “Sheltered workshops are places where people labeled with an intellectual or developmental disability might work. These are places where they are segregated or separated” (People First of Canada, 2023).

you work 100 or 120 hours per week until you start to make your name. And I was starting to make my name. But that takes its toll, particularly when you have a physical disability and just in terms of rest and mobility and those sorts of things.”

Similar to the demands of working long hours, expectations around working speed and multitasking can be difficult for people with developmental disabilities, people with variable or unpredictable presentation of their disability, or people who require additional time away from work to attend appointments (e.g., with health care providers). These limitations may reduce career mobility opportunities for people with disabilities working in sectors with stringent attendance or productivity expectations.

The evidence provided above demonstrates that there are a number of occupational barriers that can limit employment opportunities for people with disabilities. This can then result in people with disabilities being stuck in low-skill positions that leave little opportunity for advancement or career mobility. Therefore, it is important that people with disabilities have access to educational opportunities and on-the-job training so that they have the skills to pursue employment opportunities that can lead to careers rather than precarious and exploitative employment. It also means combatting false conceptions that people with disabilities are only qualified to work in low-skilled positions, as well as providing the support that they need, particularly timely accommodations, to succeed at their work.

DISCRIMINATION

It has been well documented in the literature that people with disabilities face significant and persistent barriers to a meaningful career due to biases and discrimination that lead to poor employment experiences and outcomes, such as lower earnings (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2018; Tompa et al., 2020). The negative stereotypes and/or a lack of knowledge that employers hold about people with disabilities contribute to discrimination in hiring decisions as well as lower retention rates and undervaluation by employers (CCRW, 2016; Centre for Research on Work Disability Policy, 2020).

As a key factor in the employment experience, the career mobility of people with disabilities is also greatly impacted by discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. Robert and Harlan (2006) draw parallels between discrimination based on gender and race to discrimination based on disability. They describe discriminatory practices as interpersonal, organizational, or societal practices, rules or policies that lead to discriminatory outcomes such as unequal treatment, unequal pay, or low rates of promotion (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Though this study focuses on employment discrimination as a whole, it does offer some insight into how discrimination can have a negative impact on the promotion of people with disabilities (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

At the individual level, discrimination related to career mobility can involve negative attitudes, stereotypes, and stigma. Employers can perceive disabled employees as less productive and more burdensome due to workplace accommodations (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2018). For example, a manager's lack of accessibility-related knowledge and skills was found to be a key barrier to the career transitions for people with disabilities in the Canadian federal public service (READ Initiative, 2021). Research has also found that managers prefer employees who are 'normal' and tend to focus on what people with disabilities cannot do rather than what they can do, which can have a negative impact on career mobility and opportunities for promotion (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

Robert and Harlan (2006) also discuss the concept of fictionalization and the impact it can have on job promotion.

In the case of disability, once an individual is fictionalized as incompetent or helpless, by definition they become "liabilities" to the organization. Regardless of their actual abilities, talents, and skills, it is presumed that these "liability workers" cannot compete with their nondisabled peers (p. 616).

The authors describe how the process of fictionalization allows organizations and managers to legitimize the unequal treatment of workers with disabilities. For example, the merit system associated with bureaucratic organizations can lead to organizational practices that encourage and tolerate the exclusion of people with disabilities in the promotion process. They found that the rules of the merit system are often circumvented to promote candidates who are considered "abled," while candidates considered "disabled," regardless of their abilities, are often ignored or discouraged from seeking advancement (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

Discrimination can also occur at the organizational level. Such discrimination can take the form of social isolation, resentment, patronizing treatment, harassment from colleagues or supervisors, tokenism, and not giving people with disabilities fulfilling roles in the workplace (Robert & Harlan, 2006). Other examples of organizational discrimination can be outgroup status, perceptions of limited job fit, lack of role models, and lack of mentors (Jones, 1997). These forms of discrimination can have a negative impact on many aspects of employment, including career mobility (Robert & Harlan, 2006; Jones, 1997).

Discrimination can vary by disability type. For example, disability research has demonstrated that there are preferences for hiring people with particular types of disabilities compared to others (Samosh, 2019). Samosh (2019) found that employers are more willing to hire people with physical disabilities for management positions in comparison to people with mental or developmental disabilities. Further, multiple studies that examined experiences based on disability type found that those with non-physical disabilities reported more negative employment experiences than those with physical disabilities (Snyder et al., 2010; Brzykcy et al.,

2019; Dammeyer & Chapman, 2018). Differences in experiences also seem to exist at different stages in the job cycle. For example, an American study found that people with physical disabilities tended to be rated more favourably in job interviews than people with intellectual or psychiatric-related disabilities (Dispenza, 2019).

Discrimination was also widely discussed by interviewees in this project as a key barrier to career mobility at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels. As emphasized by one respondent:

“Well, first and foremost, the biggest barrier in all work environments is attitudinal barriers because you can be laser-focused on the physical barriers by installing a ramp, an elevator, and saying that you're accessible for people to get inside the building. But if you don't address the attitudes that people may have towards persons with disabilities first, it doesn't matter if they can get inside the building.”

Attitudinal barriers are significant because they permeate the employment experiences of people with disabilities. Addressing these barriers includes, for example, making sure the application and interview process are inclusive and accessible, ensuring appropriate accommodations for employees, and fostering a culture that encourages people with disabilities to progress in their careers through lateral or upward mobility. Interviewees with lived experience provided several examples of discrimination that they had experienced that impacted their career mobility. For instance, one study participant relayed that their employer made assumptions about their abilities, largely based on stereotypes about what people with disabilities can and cannot do:

“But after my internship, he had too many concerns about me hurting myself because of being in a wheelchair. And then he opened up about the fact that he'd been modifying tasks without me knowing based on what he thought I would be capable of as a person with a disability. So that was my first experience, which then led me to kind of wonder, where's this headspace coming from for folks?”

A further challenge described by interviewees relates to employers making assumptions about the lives and employment aspirations of people with disabilities:

“And some of that's the perception of the employer too, because there's a lot of misconceptions. And sometimes employers, we hear this a lot that they assume that a person has income benefits or they just need part-time hours. [...] I'm sure they live with their parents. They're not really relying on this money [from the job] or, you know, they haven't done anything heavy. So, we can't give them any more responsibility. They're just happy to be out of the house for a few hours. And there's a lot of these, like really outdated ideas about what a person with a

disability's life looks like and their financial situation, their family situation, really outdated ideas.”

Another respondent indicated that, generally speaking, the higher someone progresses in their career, the less flexible and understanding an organization can become of their particular circumstances and accommodation needs. In some cases, interviewees experienced more discrimination from colleagues as they advanced in their careers. One interviewee linked these challenges to their perceptions of the societal expectations that leaders and managers need to be independent and thus do not require support:

“Well, in my experience, the higher up the person goes, the less flexible and understanding and supportive the organization is to that person.” [...] “Like we only want leaders who know how to lead. We don't want leaders who are dependent on other people to help them lead.”

The literature review and interviews identified a number of actions that can be taken to address discrimination in the workplace. For example, Tompa, Samosh, & Boucher describe employer capacity around disability as ‘disability confidence’, whereby employers develop a better understanding of the challenges experienced by people with disabilities, as well as how to better support them throughout their career journey (2020). Engaging in disability awareness training can help employers move out of their comfort zone and address misconceptions and stigma (Tompa et al., 2020). Once employers become more aware of key disability issues, they can then further broaden perspectives by recognizing individual abilities rather than stereotypes (Tompa et al., 2020). Employers who are disability confident have the knowledge and skills to create inclusive and accessible work environments, as well as advocate for changes to workplace culture within and beyond their organizations (Tompa et al., 2020).

Addressing discrimination and attitudinal barriers by changing workplace culture and employer education was also noted as a key facilitator in several of the interviews for this project. This aligns with findings in the literature that education and awareness of employers is essential for addressing stigma and discrimination related to the career mobility of people with disabilities. Without effective education and training of employers, people with disabilities themselves are often forced to continually educate their colleagues and managers on accessibility and accommodations. Interviewees with lived experience of disability echoed this frustration:

“People have unconscious bias and stereotypes for whatever reasons. They're built into us. They're not going to change until those of us that have that [a disability] are in that place or in that space can change it for them and really kind of educate them. So that's kind of how I always viewed it. That was also a really heavy mantle for a 17 to 19-year-old kid to represent.”

The literature review also highlighted that people with disabilities in positions of power may be more effective in their efforts to advocate for inclusion while at the same time normalizing the representation of people with disabilities in senior management roles. Multiple interviewees highlighted the importance and impact of representation of people with disabilities in senior positions, with one interview respondent noting:

“I think [there is a] need for a critical mass of people in senior roles who have disabilities and who are willing to disclose that [...] because it’s normalized at the top. And I think that normalization can kind of trickle down.”

Multiple interviewees also suggested that disability in the workplace needs to be normalized overall in order to support all employees and provide a sense of belonging.

Limited organizational resources and accessibility, however, can be barriers to implementing effective anti-discrimination measures in the workplace (Eichhorst et al., 2010). This can include a lack of clarity in the process for requesting reasonable accommodations, as well as a lack of awareness and understanding among employers about what is required (CRAC, 2020). For example, the misconception that workplace accommodations are expensive and inefficient results in people with disabilities not receiving the support that they need and having to advocate for accommodations every time they enter a new position (Tompka et al., 2020). Further, barriers at the beginning of the job cycle due to an onerous and complicated hiring process and inadequate onboarding (READ Initiative, 2021) can also lead to challenges for people with disabilities. Making employers more aware of their duty to accommodate as well as the actual cost of any needed accommodations or adjustments would help to create a change in workplace culture and stigma regarding accommodations for people with disabilities (Tompka et al., 2020).

DISCLOSURE AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Disclosing a disability within an employment context is a complicated decision that can have both positive and negative repercussions on a person’s employment experience, including career advancement. For example, employees whose self-disclosure is met with an inadequate response can become demoralized and frustrated (Flick & McManus, 2022). Discrimination and stigma can also result in individuals being seen as responsible for their disability and thus lead to strategies that de-emphasize the disability rather than embrace it (Lyons et al., 2017). Further, the additional time and labour involved in explaining a disability and the need for accommodations to supervisors or colleagues who are not supportive were found to be particularly challenging for people with disabilities (CRAC, 2020). This is particularly the case for supervisors who are unaware of workplace rules and regulations about accommodations, are not interested in educating themselves, or are not supported or encouraged by their organization to better

understand the needs of people with disabilities (CRAC, 2020). For these reasons, many employees with disabilities often only disclose their disabilities if they see it as necessary to get the accommodations that they need (CRAC, 2020).

As a result of challenges related to disclosure, people with disabilities will often rely on a variety of coping strategies to avoid disclosure and minimize the visibility of their disability in the workplace (Boucher, 2017). One study examined different disclosure strategies and found that ‘decategorization’ strategies (i.e., distancing oneself from the disability) reduced negative reactions from employers and colleagues, but only if the individuals were not seen as ‘responsible’ for their disability (Lyons et al., 2017). “Decategorization involves bolstering competence by de-emphasizing the disability and encourages classification in terms of some other valued individuating information (e.g., membership to a prestigious organization)” (Lyons et al., 2017; p. 1376-1377). ‘Integration’ strategies (i.e., highlighting the positive aspects of the disability) also reduced negative reactions, but again only if the individuals were not seen as responsible for their disability (Lyons et al., 2017).

A lack of clarity in the process for requesting reasonable accommodations from human resources (HR) was also cited as a barrier to career advancement. This can include unclear processes as well as uncertainty regarding who would have access to disclosure data and how this data would be used (CRAC, 2020). Standardizing the process for requesting accommodations, including data management, and ensuring that this process is well understood by all employees is critical for ensuring that people with disabilities receive the support that they need.

According to several international studies, as a result of the challenges noted above many people with disabilities avoid disclosing their disability. One study found that participants felt that disclosure would be easier as they advanced into more senior roles, but in reality, disclosure rates actually decreased at more senior career stages (CRAC, 2020). Further, a study in the UK found that 43 per cent of people with disabilities avoided disclosing their disability due to the belief that it would stall their progression at work or affect their promotion (Samsung Newsroom UK, 2022). They cited a fear of being judged or being made to feel like an outsider, as well as concern that their colleagues would value them less (Samsung Newsroom UK, 2022). The study also found that 65 per cent of respondents wanted to avoid the embarrassment or awkwardness of discussing challenges with colleagues (Samsung Newsroom UK, 2022).

Another UK study examined barriers to disclosure among STEM scientists with disabilities. It found that disability disclosure was lower in STEM disciplines than outside of STEM and that scientists working in the fields of engineering, medicine, and some physical sciences were particularly reluctant to disclose their disabilities. Disclosure was found to be higher among women than men and higher among part-time employees than full-time. These lower rates of disclosure were attributed to the competitive environment of the STEM fields (CRAC, 2020).

Project interviewees also highlighted a number of challenges related to disclosure and accommodations. For example, a few interviewees described how discrimination related to disclosure and accommodations can occur early in the job application process. One respondent who is a wheelchair user reported that they were not interviewed by a potential employer who assumed that they would be unable to perform the role due to physical barriers within the workplace. As a result of these types of situations, many interviewees suggested that employers require more guidance in developing accessible job applications as well as providing accommodations during the application process. For example, most employers do not inform potential applicants of the availability of accommodations during the application process, most notably during the interview stage. Accommodations, such as receiving questions in advance or having a support person during interviews, can be helpful for some people with disabilities and may enable a more accurate assessment of the candidate's skills and abilities.

Several interview respondents highlighted that once a person starts a new position, the onus is usually on that employee to request any needed accommodations, which can be a burdensome process that needs to be undertaken for every new position in the future:

“Once you go through the recruitment process and you start your job, you have to ask again, you know, for accommodation to do your job. And then, you know, all along a year and a half, two years, three years, you have to start all over again and request. It's like it comes to a point. It's almost begging for accommodation, you know, from an employee's perspective.”

Likewise, it can often take weeks for the accommodations to be implemented and the employee may appear to be underperforming in the meantime. From the employer's perspective, there can be a fear of not knowing how to accommodate an employee in a new role, particularly given that disability-related information is only shared on a need-to-know basis which can result in accommodations not being in place when an employee starts a new role.

Interviewees also reported that the possibility of losing accommodations when starting a new position impacts their willingness to pursue new opportunities. A new position could require repeating the accommodation approval process or educating a new manager. Moreover, once an employee becomes comfortable with their manager it can be very intimidating to change positions. As one interview respondent noted:

“There's not a lot of mobility. They get comfortable with their manager. Their manager knows what their accommodations are, their manager knows who they are as a person, and they've got a really good relationship. And until that manager moves on, they're not moving anywhere.”

Interviewees expressed the need for employers to reflect on their practices around disclosure and accommodations related to both the recruitment and employment process. In particular,

one interviewee explained that being the only employee in a workplace who has disclosed a disability feels like being singled out. For this reason, they encouraged employers to consider what may encourage or prevent people with disabilities from applying for positions at their organization. One of the employer interviewees stated:

“You can’t just say, ‘Well, we would love to hire more people with disabilities. But to be honest with you, a lot of people with disabilities, they very rarely apply at our organization’. And so my first question is, have you ever thought that maybe there could be barriers as to why those individuals aren’t applying to begin with?”

Interviewees also suggested that employer policies that take the whole person under consideration is critical for facilitating the career mobility for people with disabilities. Several interview respondents acknowledged that the size of an organization will likely impact its ability to make accommodations, but that employers should be more inclusive in the workplace wherever possible:

“The one thing that my current organization does really well, at least in my perspective, is they take the whole person into consideration. [...] They understand that there are external factors outside of these walls that impact your ability to do your job.”

One employer interviewee discussed the accessibility passport program that is being implemented by the federal government. In this program, employees who request accommodations and have them approved keep them on their passport so that they are secured regardless of their position within the federal government. Once approved for the passport, these accommodations cannot be taken away from that employee. It is hoped that the passport will help to increase the number of employees with disabilities who are willing to pursue a new position.

Remote, hybrid, and flexible work is another form of accommodation that was perceived by some interviewees to have the potential to facilitate career mobility. These types of work environments became increasingly common throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and were noted by some interviewees as a good opportunity for both synchronous and asynchronous communication, as well as removing the physical barriers of getting to work if being in the office was not required. However, some interview subjects also suggested that remote work can be a barrier if colleagues are not available to ask for clarification or assistance. Further, another respondent noted that employer policies around flexible work are becoming more rigid again:

“Workplaces that are virtual or hybrid to some extent are a lot more accessible. And with COVID, there was a really great shift in that regard. But even since then, with COVID, [...] I’ve seen a significant shift away from that, both

personally and professionally. I'm seeing a lot of employers adopt hybrid models, but be very stringent in how they define that."

Another approach mentioned by an employer interviewee for facilitating career mobility involves using inclusive design principles, which aim to make the workplace accessible to all employees. For example, instead of the onus being placed on employees to disclose a disability, occupational assessments are conducted for all employees regardless of disability status to ensure that all employees receive the support that they need. Employers can also consult with disability organizations to conduct accessibility assessments to ensure an inclusive workplace. One interviewee noted:

"Your approach should actually be a unified approach, where you build a culture where individuals feel as though, regardless of the circumstance, whether a disability is evident, visible or invisible, that [...] you're creating a culture that somebody feels as though they can approach senior management and express what it is that they'd like to have as far as career advancement."

As an example, one interviewee expressed frustration at how physical accessibility-related requests in their workplace are treated separately from regular building maintenance matters:

"Why wouldn't you go through maintenance? Like, if it was a door that was not disability-related, where would you go?"

The literature also suggests that it is important that employers ensure consistency of support across the entire employment cycle as well as across departments, particularly from senior management (Flick & McManus, 2022; Braddock & Bachelder, 1994). For example, improved employer awareness and understanding of reasonable adjustments across an entire organization is critical to providing consistent supports (CRAC, 2020). Further, flexible and proactive approaches need to be tailored to employees' strengths, abilities, and goals to co-create career paths (Flick & McManus, 2022; Samosh, 2022). Career development programs should also be established at workplaces and can be targeted toward employees with disabilities who have remained at the same level for five years or more (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994). Finally, disability awareness training should be incorporated into diversity training in the workplace to address discrimination and stigma (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994).

There is also strong evidence in the literature that standardization and structure among HR practices can reduce bias and promote inclusion (Schloemer-Jarvis et al., 2022). Standardization among performance evaluations and appraisals was shown to assess people with disabilities more fairly by reducing bias (Schloemer-Jarvis et al., 2022). Subjective evaluations are more likely to result in managers and supervisors being reluctant or uncertain about the performance of people with disabilities, such as assuming that they cannot perform certain tasks (Schloemer-Jarvis et al., 2022). For example, strategies like focusing on necessary qualifications rather than

ideal qualifications can limit the exclusion of people with disabilities (Schloemer-Jarvis et al., 2022).

SOCIAL NETWORKS

It is well known in the literature that a lack of social networks not only has a negative impact on overall wellbeing (Emerson et al., 2021), it can negatively affect employment prospects, including career advancement (Robert & Harlan, 2006). For example, Robert and Harlan (2006) found that organizational networks, which were lacking among most of the people with disabilities whom they had interviewed, were an important barrier to obtaining a promotion (Robert & Harlan, 2006).

A key obstacle for people with disabilities related to building organizational and social networks stems from their experiences of being marginalized in social settings (Langford et al., 2013). For example, research suggests that discrimination and stigma can result in colleagues avoiding social interaction with people with disabilities, thus limiting the development of their professional relationships (Langford et al., 2013). Furthermore, technology related to social media, such as LinkedIn and Facebook, may not be as easily accessible to those with certain disabilities, which can also contribute to obstacles in forming organizational networks (Langford et al., 2013).

Not surprisingly, both the literature review and interviews emphasized that facilitating social networking and social cohesion can aid in the career advancement of people with disabilities (Flick & McManus, 2022; Kulkarni, 2012; Samosh, 2022; Samosh, 2021), including connections both inside and outside of an organization (Samosh, 2022). For example, having support person(s) was found to be an important factor in successfully navigating professional needs and development (Brucker & Sandar, 2020). A support person can be someone affiliated with an employment supports services provider who can assist with many types of support throughout the employment cycle, including job searching, job coaching, career support, accommodations support, and interpreter services (Government of Ontario, 2023). Having a co-worker 'buddy' system to facilitate onboarding to a new position was also cited as a key facilitator to career transitions in the Canadian federal public service (READ Initiative, 2021).

Inclusive managers and mentors were also noted as effective tools to support career advancement (Flick & McManus, 2022; Samosh, 2022), where senior employees with disabilities act as role models to facilitate disclosure and reduce stigma (CRAC, 2020; Samosh, 2022). These can include having a manager with a disability or a manager who has other employees with a disability (READ Initiative, 2021). Strong connections with family, friends, and role models are also important for building social connections that can have a positive effect on career mobility and advancement (Samosh, 2022).

The majority of interviewees discussed the positive impact of people who supported their careers, including managers, mentors, and professional or social networks. In particular, several interviewees noted that making industry connections and networking was important for career mobility. For example, one respondent noted that a key moment in their career occurred because someone in their network recommended them for a position:

“At the end of the day, the world is still not built for me. And somebody had to give me a shot to let me show them that I could do everything that, you know, my able-bodied counterparts could do [...] and I will be forever grateful for the individual that tapped me on the shoulder.”

The significant impact of a strong, supportive manager was also emphasized in many interviews. This topic was often discussed in the context of work accommodations such that people with disabilities reported a strong desire to stay in a position with a supportive manager who understood and supported their needs and career goals. One interviewee’s story is indicative of the importance of a supportive supervisor:

“So I was doing things like being a tour guide for international students, which was going around the campus, which was not super accessible at times. So now looking back on that, I realize how much having a great supervisor allowed for it to be quite adapted to what I was able to do. So I was able to create a separate tour route that incorporated all of the elevators. I was able to have a special keycard to get into the dorms so that I could take the tour through the accessible dorm and head of systems, opening doors and things like that. So, when I was in [this job], I didn't necessarily see that as accommodations. But looking back now, I realize that I was very lucky to have a really accommodating supervisor.”

The impact of supportive people may facilitate opportunities that are relevant to an employee’s skills and experience while also building confidence. Multiple interview respondents suggested that knowing your skillset and pursuing positions that are the right fit is critical for job success and fulfillment. This is a challenge given the internalized stigma faced by individuals with disabilities, as is reported in the literature and was discussed by several interviewees. Confidence may be increased by building a supportive social network, working with supportive managers, and having a positive representation of people with disabilities within the work environment.

EMPLOYMENT SERVICES AND TRANSPORTATION

Many stakeholders who were interviewed for this project discussed the incompatibility of employment services with career mobility goals, most notably with the funding structures of these services. The interviewees described how employment services funding is generally tied to

matching a quota of people with jobs, without considering the quality of employment or the potential for career mobility and advancement. As one service provider noted:

“The way in which we define success or outcomes that comes to disability in employment, the way that a lot of funding structures are set up, is like a checklist. Like, how many people got jobs, as opposed to really looking at the quality of their employment.”

This funding structure may incentivize service providers to match as many people to jobs as possible, without actually promoting people’s advancement or mobility within their careers. Even when a good employment match is made, employment service support is often provided to acquire employment, rather than continuing on a longer term to facilitate continued professional development and career mobility. This was raised by several service provider interviewees, with one stating:

“You have to be careful about that because that sometimes traps a person into the role that they were best suited for and matched for. And then you realize that they’re not being considered for other positions.”

Moreover, interviewees noted that many people with disabilities do not have the funds for public transportation and that transportation is often not covered by employment service funding. Participants also cited concerns about public transportation not being reliable, which can result in people being late for interviews or employment. There can also be accessibility issues with public transportation, such as a lack of assistance with wheelchair straps. As described by one interviewee:

“Sometimes the bus would be late or the Skytrain elevator would be broken down and I’ve had people just go right past me, or sometimes they wouldn’t let me on the bus and nobody was there to help or to do my straps for me.”

For some people with disabilities, public transportation can also feel dangerous:

“I don’t really like public transit that much because I have brittle bones [...], I’m always worried someone’s going to fall on top of me or something.”

Being reliant on public transportation can also limit the job search area for some people with disabilities. For example, job search catchments can be limited to places a person can access independently or to areas on certain bus routes. When this job search limitation is overlaid with other parameters related to skills and abilities, potential positions can be quite limited for some people with disabilities. Relocating to areas with more career opportunities is also sometimes not an option, as some people with disabilities are unable to leave their established support networks and medical service providers.

“I can't leave this area that says this is where my doctor is, my psychologist, all my support networks. You know, I'm like, yeah, I might make \$5 an hour more, but I'm going to be in trouble.”

As a result of these issues related to transportation, several interviewees discussed the importance of integrating transit considerations within employment support programs. One interview respondent emphasized the importance and relatively low cost of providing transport funding as part of employment programs:

“So when building out funding, you know, one of the things that we would sometimes see is that people would get funding for certain aspects of their job, but they weren't getting funding for transport and then they couldn't get to their job and everything was in place, but they didn't get the \$20 that they need to get to work. And so now everything is falling through, right?”

Further, a service provider emphasized the need to make transportation a part of the conversation from the outset when working with people with disabilities who are looking for employment:

“Right out the gate, I'll ask a person what is your catchment area of job search? Like, are you looking for a place you could walk to or a place you can bike to? Or I've had people say I can only work on bus route number one. [...] it's an early, early conversation.”

Supports for career mobility also extend beyond the immediate workplace into broader societal systems. For example, people with disabilities should be able to successfully participate in existing mainstream career mobility programs (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994). Further, lifelong learning strategies, active labour market policies, and social protection systems are also thought to be effective in improving labour market inclusion for people with disabilities (Eichhorst et al., 2010). By focusing on work capacity (rather than work incapacity) and promoting a culture of inclusion, employers can improve the overall employment experience for people with disabilities (Eichhorst et al., 2010).

SELF-LIMITING BEHAVIOURS

As a result of their lifelong experience of facing discrimination and stigma, people with disabilities may develop self-limiting behaviours that are detrimental to their career mobility. For example, Brewster et al. (2015 in Samosh, 2019) report that a lack of confidence among disabled employees at a university in England may have acted as a barrier to applying for leadership roles even if they had the necessary skills for the positions. Further, Kulkarni and Gopakumar (2014) describe how people with disabilities may have dysfunctional career

expectations due to a lack of confidence and perceptions that they should be ‘happy’ with any job. Other research has shown that people with disabilities may not proactively seek work-related help as they may be grateful for what has already been provided to them, feel guilty asking for the accommodations that they need, or rely on external support rather than support from their employer (Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Research by Samosh et al. (2022) and Roulstone and Williams (2014) found that self-limiting barriers can extend to people with disabilities who are working at the managerial level, limiting their lateral or upward mobility.

Engaging in self-advocacy and believing that self-advocacy can mitigate social barriers has been suggested as a key career self-management strategy for people with disabilities (Holzberg & Ferraro, 2021; Kulkarni & Gopakumar, 2014; Samosh, 2022). For example, a survey of people with disabilities in leadership positions cited self-advocacy as a key facilitator to career progression (Samosh, 2022). Respondents of this survey suggested that being able to perceive that social barriers can be mitigated and advocating to address them was important for a positive employment experience (Samosh, 2022). Further, an American study examining self-advocacy among students with disabilities at post-secondary institutions argued that self-advocacy skills are key to success in education and employment for individuals with disabilities (Holzberg & Ferraro, 2021), particularly in a post-secondary education setting. The study found that students who participated in self-advocacy modules had an improved ability to request accommodations for their disabilities (Holzberg & Ferraro, 2021).

EDUCATION

Limited access to education and on-the-job learning opportunities is cited as a common barrier experienced by people with disabilities that can directly impact career advancement (Braddock & Bachelder, 1994). It is well established in the literature that these disparities are in part due to the significant barriers that students with disabilities face at all levels of education. Barriers to education can include, for example, physical, technological, systemic, financial, and attitudinal, or can result from a failure to provide accommodations in a timely manner (OHRC, 2023). For example, a survey among prospective, current, and recently graduated MBA students in Canada who identify as having a disability found that respondents widely and consistently reported stigma; a lack of flexibility; inaccessible academic, social, and recruiting practices; and a lack of awareness and representation through their experiences (Access to Success, 2022). Such educational barriers can in turn impact the career mobility of people with disabilities. For example, Eichhorst et al. (2010) found that the career mobility of people with disabilities was limited by their lower levels of educational attainment overall.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (n.d.) outlines the following as the main barriers to educational services for students with disabilities:

- **Inadequate funding**, which can lead to accommodation decisions being made based on budgetary considerations rather than on an assessment of the actual needs of students.
- **Physical inaccessibility** such as a lack of ramps and/or elevators in multi-level school buildings, heavy doors, inaccessible washrooms, and/or inaccessible transportation to and from school.
- **Accommodation** is not always provided in a timely manner, is often insufficient, and sometimes not provided at all.
- **Lack of individualization**, relying on blanket approaches to accommodation, rather than assessing each student on an individual basis.
- **Dispute resolution mechanisms are often ineffective**, and disputes about accommodation are often causing students to lose time in school and are increasingly ending up at the Ontario Human Rights Commission as complaints.
- **Negative attitudes and stereotypes** resulting from a lack of knowledge about and sensitivity to disability issues on the part of some educators, staff, and students (OHRC, n.d.).

Interviewees also discussed similar attitudinal (e.g., stigma) and physical (e.g., transportation) accessibility barriers in education settings as those described in employment settings. Some of the additional barriers in educational settings include financial barriers and a lack of tailored educational opportunities to support learning. For example, educational institutions may not have the resources to adjust teaching or evaluation activities to support differing needs. One interviewee discussed the financial barriers associated with receiving support to attend post-secondary education:

“Some people need assistance when it comes to getting books out, getting the school stuff out, using the washroom, stuff like that. If they want to get help for school, they have to pay for it themselves.”

A further education barrier discussed in the interviews is the circumstances in which a person with disabilities receives accommodations in college or university but is unable to continue receiving comparable accommodations in their careers. Despite having the required knowledge to excel in a field, this gap in accommodation accessibility may result in a person with a disability experiencing challenges transitioning from education into employment. This highlights the importance of supporting people with disabilities with appropriate accommodations throughout all phases of recruitment and employment.

CAREER ADVANCEMENT INTERVENTIONS

Career interventions are services that aim to support people with disabilities with career planning, mobility, job entry, work adjustment, and retirement (Hartung et al., 2015). Types of career interventions can include vocational guidance that matches people to occupations, career education to help with career transitions, or coaching to improve success and advancement (Hartung et al., 2015). Although there has been research conducted on career interventions to improve employment experiences for people with disabilities as a whole, there have been few studies on interventions geared to improve career mobility specifically.

One study completed in the United States analysed multiple types of interventions specifically aimed at promoting the career development and mobility of people with disabilities (Dispenza, 2019). The first intervention type is based on self-determination theory, which suggests that basic psychological needs are met through one's capacity to autonomously self-regulate (Dispenza, 2019). This approach can be helpful for those living with intellectual and developmental disabilities as autonomy, relatedness, and competence are significantly and positively related to motivation and well-being, which in turn are connected to improved career development (Dispenza, 2019). Career intervention techniques implementing self-determination theory, such as career counseling that fosters an autonomous supportive environment, have been suggested to have a positive effect on career advancement for people with disabilities (Dispenza, 2019).

The second approach described by this study involves vocational rehabilitation services, which include, for example, career-related assessments and workplace evaluations, individual and group career counseling, case management and referral services, interpreter services, transition vocational services, assistive work technology, etc. Finally, a third approach involves supported and customized employment that assists people with disabilities to integrate into competitive work settings, thus improving mobility opportunities (Dispenza, 2019). Information on the impact and success of these last two approaches were not available in the study.

In addition to the research noted above, there are also several published employer best practices that help organizations with the employment and retention of people with disabilities. Recruiting people with disabilities is encouraged by some employer best practice guides to attract talented and qualified individuals who can offer a more diverse perspective (DCOI, n.d.; DiscoverAbility, 2023). Encouraging employers to become more knowledgeable about disabilities, business benefits, etiquette, and accommodations can be a meaningful intervention (DCOI, n.d.). Further, educating employers about recognizing unconscious bias (DiscoverAbility, 2023), as well as correcting misinformation through employer education, is important to dispel myths about hiring and working with professionals with disabilities (DCOI, n.d.).

Supporting employers to develop inclusive practices in the workplace can also help to inform employers of actionable items and show that most inclusive changes do not have to be big to make a meaningful difference (DCOI, n.d.). Such practices can improve employment experiences for people with disabilities overall but are not necessarily focused specifically on improving career mobility. Actions like normalizing diversity, reviewing organizational policy for potential barriers, using inclusive language, ensuring an inclusive physical environment, respecting confidentiality, and providing diversity education are all best practices that can make a significant difference in the employment experiences of people with disabilities (DCOI, n.d.).

CONCLUSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this research project was to provide insights into the challenges faced by people with disabilities with respect to career mobility, as well as how policies, programs, and services can best support people with disabilities in their employment journey. Although there is very limited research that has been conducted on this topic, particularly in the Canadian context, there is nonetheless evidence that people with disabilities tend to have less career mobility than those without disabilities. Although it is difficult to quantify the impact of a lack of career mobility, it is clear that people with disabilities are more likely to experience limitations on career advancement and work in higher-risk, precarious positions that often lead to unemployment. The interviews also confirmed that people with disabilities simply have fewer opportunities related to employment overall and can be pigeonholed or “stuck” in certain types of positions that offer little opportunity for mobility.

Before summarizing some of the key barriers and facilitators to career mobility for people with disabilities, it is first important to emphasize that interviewees took a much broader view of the term career mobility than typically used in the literature. Although interviewees still discussed the importance of job mobility, mobility was framed more around the freedom of choice and opportunity for pursuing a fulfilling career, including all the movement (upward, lateral, education and training, personal development) that a typical career journey involves. This is in contrast to simply finding a job that an individual is expected to be satisfied with, regardless of fit, need, interests, or changing life circumstances. This conception of career mobility is important as it has implications at a program and policy level, emphasizing the need to look at the whole person, including both their short and long-term interests, needs, and desires related to pursuing a fulfilling career.

The literature review and interviews highlighted a number of barriers and facilitators to career mobility for people with disabilities. In particular, discrimination was identified as the most significant challenge to a person with a disability’s pursuit of a career. This can result from negative stereotypes and a lack of knowledge from both employers and colleagues of how to accommodate and interact with people with disabilities (CCRW, 2016; Centre for Research on Work Disability Policy, 2020). Addressing attitudinal barriers that lead to discrimination is important because they permeate throughout all aspects of an individual’s employment experience, including finding a job, the interview process, ensuring appropriate

accommodations, and career advancement. Most interviewees mentioned experiencing attitudinal barriers in the workplace, largely stemming from stereotypes related to what they can accomplish, their career goals and interests, and the types of support that they need.

Not surprisingly, improving workplace culture and ‘disability confidence’ throughout the organization was noted as critical to facilitating career mobility, through practices such as disability awareness training to help employers address misconceptions and stigma. Changing workplace culture was also mentioned as a key facilitator by interview participants, with multiple interviewees stating that management plays a critical role in leading that change.

Closely associated with discrimination, issues around disclosure and accommodations were also highlighted as barriers to career mobility. Disclosure is a challenge due to the potential negative reaction and potential discrimination that people with disabilities can face from employers and colleagues. Under most employment practices, however, disclosure is required for people with disabilities to receive the accommodations that they need. In terms of accommodations themselves, people with disabilities can face numerous challenges in receiving the accommodations they need, often having to continually advocate for accommodations when taking on new job opportunities. In particular, interviewees discussed inaccessible application processes and unclear procedures to secure accommodations.

The literature on career mobility as well as the experience of employer and academic interviewees, highlighted the importance of standardizing the accommodation process for all employees across an organization. This means that all employees, not just people with disabilities, are assessed for and provided accommodations as an automatic process for starting a new job and that an employee does not need to request accommodations again when moving to a new position. It also involves considering all aspects of an individual to ensure that their needs are being addressed.

A lack of social networks was also mentioned as a barrier in the literature, with people with disabilities more likely to be marginalized in social settings and therefore less able to build professional and social networks. Interviewees also highlighted the relevance of professional networks, and in particular, the importance of specific individuals to their career such as a supervisor or mentor. At the same time, however, it was acknowledged that reliance on an individual supervisor, rather than being confident in the organization as a whole, can result in uncertainty around moving to a new position. Self-limiting behaviours were found to be a barrier in the literature, with some employees being hesitant to pursue mobility and advancement opportunities. Again, this is primarily due to a fear of losing accommodations or moving away from a supportive supervisor. Finally, a lack of representation of people with disabilities in senior leadership roles was also mentioned by some interviewees as a barrier to career advancement and mobility.

During the interviews, many stakeholders discussed the incompatibility of employment services with career mobility goals, most notably with the funding structures of these services. Further, many interviewees felt that it is critical for employment policies and programs to incorporate transportation funding and considerations to ensure that transport is not an impediment to career opportunities. People with disabilities also may develop self-limiting behaviours that are detrimental to their career mobility. Engaging in self-advocacy and perceiving social barriers as contestable has been suggested as a key career self-management strategy for people with disabilities.

Finally, the literature also highlights how educational barriers are important factors in career mobility for people with disabilities, including barriers that they may face to both formal education and on-the-job learning opportunities. Educational barriers were also mentioned by some interviewees who shared their challenges securing supports while pursuing their secondary and/or post-secondary education. That said, some interviewees emphasized the importance of education in helping them to have greater choices and opportunities in their careers, including their ability to pursue career advancement.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although there is some research that has been conducted on the career mobility of people with disabilities, it is quite limited. Historically, most employment research has focused on supporting the employment of people with disabilities without much attention paid to career advancement or mobility as well as what would constitute ‘meaningful’ employment for people with disabilities. This can make it difficult to tease out findings that are specifically related to understanding the relationship between disability and career mobility. Further clarification on which employment barriers and facilitators are relevant to career mobility would be helpful.

The following are the key research gaps and areas that are important for consideration for future research.

- Beyond a few studies on career mobility in the Canadian public sector, there is very little research that addresses the extent of the challenges that people with disabilities face related to career mobility in Canada. It appears that the main reason for this gap is that the primary focus of research on career development for people with disabilities is finding or maintaining a job rather than career mobility. In particular, there is a gap in research in terms of understanding the challenges experienced by people with disabilities in sectors outside of an office environment.

- There is a very limited understanding of the impact that barriers to career mobility can have on people with disabilities, employers, and society as a whole. For example, the impact of barriers to career mobility on people with disabilities related to confidence, income, opportunities for training and education, employment status, discrimination; an employer in terms of effective resource management, organizational culture, and profit; and at the society level in terms of the impact on the Canadian labour market and economy.
- A greater understanding of the different types of discrimination faced by people with disabilities at the systemic, organizational, and individual levels would be beneficial for further identifying areas for potential action. Although there is some understanding of the barriers that people with disabilities face related to career mobility – primarily focusing on areas related to discrimination, disclosure, and social and professional networks – these do not provide a thorough understanding of broader organizational barriers related to culture and policy.
- There is limited research on how social identities can impact the career mobility of people with disabilities. Only one study found for this review discussed intersectionality and career mobility. Further research using an intersectional approach would allow for more insight into how one’s social location (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) or other factors (e.g., age, educational attainment, social support networks) impact career mobility.
- In addition to limited research on the impact of intersectionality, there is also very little research on how disability type and severity interact with career mobility. As there is extensive variation in the types of disabilities people can experience, research indicates that there is also great diversity in how disability can impact one’s employment experience, including career mobility.
- Finally, there is also a need to better understand how experiences related to career mobility can differ based on sector. For example, people with disabilities working in the service sector will face different barriers than people working in an office environment. Disaggregating these experiences is critical for ensuring a detailed understanding of the barriers faced by people with disabilities as well as identifying interventions that address the unique needs of people with disabilities working in different sectors.

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