

Professional

Why do workers with disabilities struggle with career mobility?

A new report highlights why workers with disabilities often struggle with career mobility and why 'holistic change' in workforces is required



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Canada needs to better understand why workers with disabilities struggle with career mobility as well as getting hired in the first place, a recently released report says.

“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,” the report by the research organization Social Research and Demonstration Corporation concludes.

“This can make it difficult to tease out findings that are specifically related to understanding the relationship between disability and career mobility.”

In 2022, Ottawa announced Canada’s first Disability Inclusion Action Plan, a list of how the government plans to improve the lives of Canadians with disabilities. As part of the plan, the government promised to create an Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities.

The strategy would help people with disabilities find jobs, advance in their careers and become entrepreneurs. It would also help employers make their workplaces more inclusive and accessible.

The most recent data shows 27 per cent of Canadians 15 and older have a disability. They are often under-employed or unemployed. In 2022, the employment rate for 16- to 64-year-olds with disabilities was 65 per cent, versus 80 per cent for people without disabilities.

The government’s employment strategy has not been launched. It is in the final stages of development, a spokesperson for Kamal Khara, the minister of diversity, inclusion and persons with disabilities, said in an email to Canadian Affairs. More details will be available in coming weeks, the email says.

Another key part of the plan was creating the Canadian Disability Benefit, a financial benefit for working-age adults with disabilities living in poverty. Disability advocates say Ottawa’s recently announced disability benefit will not relieve poverty.

Internalized ableism

Improving career mobility for people with disabilities “is going to require holistic change,” said Shawn de Raaf, a research director at the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation and one of the report’s authors.

Employers need to make workplaces more physically accessible for workers with disabilities. But they also need to re-evaluate how their workplace culture treats people with disabilities and challenge their beliefs about what people with disabilities can and cannot do.

“Sometimes people think it’s all about accommodating wheelchairs, but that’s actually such a small piece of what needs to happen.”

Career mobility is understood in different ways, says de Raaf. In academic research, career mobility often means a person’s ability to be promoted or change jobs. But the people interviewed for the report — which included people with disabilities, employers and job support organizations — spoke about it more broadly as also including professional and personal development.

Career mobility means “thinking beyond just the job and thinking about the career,” says de Raaf.

According to the report, people with disabilities are more likely to be employed in entry-level positions, often with lower pay. Many of these jobs could be replaced by automation, the report says.

The report identified several reasons why people with disabilities struggle with career mobility. They include discrimination from employers, employees’ difficulty telling employers about their disability and requesting workplace accommodations, difficulty finding transportation, accessing education or building strong support networks.

Those are all external factors. But the report also says that sometimes, people with disabilities have attitudes that can limit their career opportunities. This is often called internalized ableism.

“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,” the report says. This could include feeling that they should not ask for more accommodations or promotions because they should just be grateful for their job. It can also mean struggling to believe in their abilities to do a job even when they are qualified for it.

Pigeon-holed

Tim Rose understands well how his personal attitudes can limit his job prospects.

“Certainly, I have internalized ableism,” said Rose, who uses a power wheelchair and has cerebral palsy spastic quadriplegia. He defines this as “the feeling that I need to succeed in spite of the barriers that are put before me.” He often feels pressure to make up for his slower typing or to work harder.

Rose has worked at CIBC since 2017. After two years working in regulatory compliance, he became the senior manager of inclusion partnerships, where he helped the bank connect with typically socially marginalized groups. Since 2021, he’s been a senior consultant on the bank’s accessibility team, making sure the customer experience is accessible.

According to the report, people with disabilities often take jobs in disability-related sectors as a way to find meaningful employment, even when that is not their first career choice.

This can cause some people to fear that they are pigeon-holed into disability-specific roles, the report says.

Rose does not see it that way for himself. Not all workers with disabilities should be in a silo of accessibility-related jobs, but he has expertise in accessibility, he says.

“This is what I live every day. This is, as a client, where I want to see improvements. So, if I’m able to make those improvements happen, then that is a really good thing.”

Promoting career mobility for people with disabilities is an important part of creating workplaces where all workers, including those with disabilities, can succeed, says de Raaf.

“Work is so important in terms of self-fulfilment,” he said.

“We need to think about how it’s not just about getting a job [or] keeping a job. But it’s also about having the same opportunities as everyone else to continue to learn, grow and change in the workplace and address those things that are holding you back.”

This makes good economic sense, says Rose.

“If we don’t care about the mobility of Canadians with disabilities, we are not caring about our economy,” he said. “This is 27 per cent of the population.”

Rose still struggles with feeling like he needs to work harder because of barriers. “I don’t think I’ve ever fully overcome [my internalized ableism], and I don’t think I ever will,” he said.

But living with a disability has also forced him to become more creative, he says. While he feels greater pressure to perform well at work because of his disability, being disabled has also taught him skills — such as teamwork and adaptability — that help him be a good worker.

“The other side of the coin to my internalized ableism is, yes, my disability can put a lot of pressure on me. But my disability can also be the number one tool.”