ACCESS ABILITY: STRATEGY REPORT

Employers' Lessons Learned in Hiring, Retaining and Advancing Employees with Disabilities

Marlena Flick and Rosemary McManus

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Access Ability strategy report synthesizes findings from research and roundtables about organizational inclusion of employees with disabilities. The findings reflect lessons learned by employers, by practitioners supporting employers, and by employees working to identify possible directions for improvement.

Research for the Access Ability strategy report included a review of publicly available literature, qualitative and quantitative data collection from public governmental and employer sites, and an environmental scan of Canadian employer initiatives on inclusion and accessibility and the resources that support them.

The report also reflects qualitative input from the participants of the Access Ability roundtable series, during which PPF gathered candid observations from diverse representatives from medium and large employers (50 employees or more) across Canada and across sectors about their efforts to improve inclusion of employees with disabilities. Participants included executives and leaders from human resources, equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives and employees with disabilities across these roles. (More details about roundtable participants can be found in the Appendix of this report.) These methods represent a thorough qualitative review of a limited scope of employers. This is by no means an exhaustive review, but it provides important initial insights.

Access Ability asked questions such as:

- Why do inequities persist for people with disabilities in the workplace?

- What have organizations learned from their years of practice and progress in disability inclusion?

- Why do strategies to improve disability inclusion sometimes fail to produce measurable results or lasting change, even when organizational support and leadership motivation are high?

While the Access Ability project did not expect to fully answer these questions, they served as a rationale and grounding point for research and consultation—and an invitation for further research and policy directions.

INTRODUCTION: WHY AREN'T WE THERE YET?

We know a lot about how people with disabilities access and experience work in Canada and globally.[1] We know less about how employers are building an accessible future of work—a future where the nature of work, and the culture, infrastructure and practices of workplaces allow people with disabilities to employ their full range of abilities and navigate the world of work equally.

Approximately one in five Canadians identify as having a disability.[2] In the years before the COVID-19 pandemic (as of the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability), 80% of working-age Canadians without disabilities were employed. For those with a disability, the employment rate was only 59%.[3] Canadians with disabilities make valuable contributions to Canadian workplaces, businesses and communities, yet Canadians with disabilities typically get paid less for equivalent work, experience more barriers to decent work and career growth and are often underemployed.[4, 5, 6, 7, 8] People with disabilities who are racialized, immigrant, Indigenous, or identify as a woman or as non-binary experience compounded and more complex effects of barriers to and at work.[9, 10, 11, 12]

SHIFTS IN UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY

The "medical model" of disability frames disability as a physical or mental (biological) limitation of a person, whose actions and self-advocacy are assumed to be the primary solutions for improving their experiences in life. Though outdated, this perception is still the more common social understanding of disability.

A newer understanding of disability, known as "the social model", understands disability as the result of environments, attitudes and social norms that are unwelcoming to the range of humans' physical and mental states and prevents some people from full participation in society. It is the experience of inequity. Solutions focus on removing both individual and systemic barriers to build a future that is accessible to all.

People with disabilities view disability in different ways and may have different preferences in language, or expectations for themselves and their environment and relationships. The priority to understand individual circumstances and their diversity remains even through the shift to more contextual understandings of disability.

A world of work that does not successfully employ the full range of these workers' skills and abilities misses perspectives, insights and innovations—and disregards the market value of their work.

There is good news: while this is a portrait of exclusion and underutilization, it is one that is increasingly recognized by Canadians and employers. The efforts of community members, disability advocates, conscientious policymakers and employers over Canada's history have resulted in greater awareness for this "last frontier of equality."[13, 14] That awareness has created an intentional environment of policy, legislation and standards federally,[15] in many provinces[16] and within the governments of Indigenous groups in Canada.[17] These advances also reflect a shift in how disability is understood globally[18] and a global call to remove barriers to the labour force and in work.

That said, remarkably little is known about the efforts and experiences of Canadian employers in trying to do better,[19] particularly those outside of federal regulation. What trends exist in employers' approaches and initiatives to disability inclusion? How are leaders and key representatives in organizations learning from and responding to this wider increase in information, guidance and legislation?

Available evidence to answer these questions includes employer-reported data, public information on organizational initiatives, and (limited) primary and secondary research from academics, research institutions and government organizations. Comparing this information with data and research on the employment experiences of people with disabilities suggests that current efforts aren't yet hitting the mark.

> "Participants who identified themselves as having a disability were twice as likely … to report that they had experienced discrimination during the pandemic."
>
> –Statistics Canada, 2020

In fact, it seems that advancement in employment equity for people with disabilities has *stuck* or even worsened. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadians with disabilities were more likely than other Canadians to live below the poverty line, and to rely on a mix of income sources including (sometimes inaccessible) government funding.[20, 21] Given that all the jobs lost in 2020 were among workers earning lower than average wages—with those earning the lowest wages being hit the hardest—it is likely that Canadians with disabilities were disproportionately affected during this time.[22]

The COVID-19 pandemic shook economies and workplaces like a strong wind shakes leaves from a tree. Out fell the old myths about workers not being productive from home, flexible

working arrangements being too disruptive, accommodations being too hard to provide and digital transformation being too expensive. Under unprecedented constraints, employers were forced to radically reshape work to include more flexible working arrangements, work-from-home set-ups, and digital and other accommodations. For some, the digital divide made these new virtual arrangements inaccessible.[23] For others, however, these changes were enormously helpful. The pandemic forced businesses to make changes to the way work was done, at times creating more accessible working environments that many employees have long awaited. For many employers, the pandemic was a crucible of assessing the status quo of working arrangements and culture, including the gaps and effectiveness of existing initiatives and business acumen related to accessibility and employee equity.

The pandemic has shown us that more accessible ways of working are possible. To make this accessibility the new norm, it is essential to understand attitudes and efforts towards disability inclusion—and the lessons learned between wanting to improve accessibility and inclusivity, and actually doing it—from the insider perspectives of employer representatives and leaders of organizational initiatives. This gap in research and public knowledge about employers' experiences hinders wider efforts to support Canadian employers and businesses in building equitable and socially responsive economic systems.

The Access Ability research and learning project aims to help fill this gap by leveraging the Public Policy Forum's national cross-sector network to share lessons about disability inclusion.

HOW WE DEFINED DISABILITY

This project assumes a broad and social understanding of disability: any kind of ability limitation or participation barrier resulting from the interaction of a person's temporary, episodic, chronic or permanent physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory condition(s) (regardless of how or when they developed) and their environment (people, social attitudes, policies, institutions, technology, infrastructure, etc.). Disability can be visible and invisible.

Our approach leans on definitions of disability established by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; the Canadian Human Rights Act; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and provincial legislation and standards, especially the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

This definition is intended to capture a wide scope of employer activity that may affect organizational inclusion, and to recognize the complex and evolving nature of disability and how it is experienced and perceived both individually and socially. The social model of disability, in the context of this research especially, emphasizes the goal of full and equal participation of each person regardless of differences and abilities.

A FOUNDATION FOR ACTION

Many myths about disability continue to circulate in workplaces at all levels of employment. Leaders' and managers' valid questions and concerns about how to support employees effectively and set achievable goals for inclusion are often implicitly answered by these myths and assumptions, contributing to the persistence of discrimination and exclusions.[24]

It is crucial that these misconceptions be addressed and that everyone at the organization possess a strong understanding of the diverse experiences of disability before implementing strategies for inclusion.

Employers and employees should know that:

Disability is common.

Roughly one in five Canadians identify as having a disability.[25]

Disability is diverse.

"Disability" is a broad, overarching term, and people with disabilities experience a huge variation of conditions that may be physical, mental, constant or episodic.

This diversity means that no one person with disability can be asked to speak on the experiences of other people with disabilities.

The diversity of disability sometimes leads to a biased way of thinking about "hierarchies" of disability: a ranking of disabilities based on the idea that disability is inherently undesirable but that some disabilities as more "valid", "real" or "acceptable" than others. This bias can be internalized by individuals (even those with disabilities) and then reinforced or institutionalized by policies and practices, creating and cementing inequity.

Disability can be invisible.

Invisible disabilities are those that are not immediately apparent—like mental health issues, intellectual disabilities, chronic illness and pain, cognitive injury, communication disabilities, or visual, auditory or mobility disabilities where supports like glasses or hearing aids are discreet or not used.

Disability is complex.

A person's experience of disability may be affected by other disabilities, conditions or identities including but not limited to their race, gender and sexual orientation. People with disabilities who are racialized, immigrant, Indigenous, or identify as a woman or as non-binary, experience more barriers, and more complicated ones.[26]

Many organizations provide materials and training to broaden awareness and combat misconceptions about disability, such as the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work and the Ontario Disability Employment Network (ODEN).

KEY PRIORITY AREA #1

DISCLOSURE AND ACCOMMODATIONS ACROSS THE EMPLOYMENT CYCLE

What is the state of disclosure and accommodation of disability in Canadian workplaces? How can employers take a proactive approach to designing inclusive strategies and providing accommodations to ensure that employees receive the support they need?

An employer's attitude towards disclosure of disability or need for accommodations can make or break an employee's ability to fully participate in their workplace. Employees who disclose disabilities and are met with inadequate responses can become demoralized and frustrated, and this lack of employer support can affect their experiences at work and ability to contribute. In turn, organizations miss out on employee strengths and reinforce inequities in the workplace. By learning about employees' motivations or reluctance to disclose, employers can gain insight on the effectiveness of their organization's overall approach towards employee diversity, the state of workplace culture and their organization's use of employees' full potential. A healthy and active disclosure environment is a good indicator of employee trust, the clarity of an organization's processes and the status of their efforts towards an open and equitable workplace.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Understand why employees do or don't disclose

The decision to disclose can be a complex one for employees with disabilities, even in healthy, well-organized and accessible work environments.

Many studies show that people with disabilities remain reluctant to disclose their disabilities; one such study showed that while 30% of white-collar employees in the U.S. have disabilities, only an average of 3.2% had self-identified as having a disability to their employers. More than a third of disabled employees who participated in the study reported that they had experienced discrimination or bias in the workplace, including exclusion, ignored ideas and stalled careers.[27] It is crucial that workplaces create a safe, open environment in which people who disclose their disabilities are treated fairly and respectfully.

Employees' motivations to disclose—or not to disclose—tend to be different across the employment cycle. For instance, during hiring, a person may choose not to disclose a disability to "get a foot in the door" when they fear or perceive possible discrimination or barriers. Others may disclose right away during recruitment but not know how to broach the subject with a new manager (See text box *Why Don't Employees Disclose their Disabilities?*).

However, most employees are motivated to disclose later in the employment cycle when they are already in a role or seeking advancement or a change. People are most likely to first experience disability at this stage in their careers, due the increased likelihood of developing or acquiring a disability with age.[28]

Disability is frequently portrayed and implicitly understood as clearly identifiable, permanent and consistently experienced. But disability can happen at any time and often changes over the course of a person's job and career. This common misconception about when disability first occurs or is experienced contributes to the lack of representation of and support for invisible, mental and episodic disabilities.

As a result, disclosure can be particularly tricky for employees with invisible disabilities. Employees with invisible disabilities may fear not being believed or taken as seriously, and as a result tend not to disclose invisible disabilities even when this causes them harm or continued challenges at work.[29] In these cases, it may not be obvious to employers and colleagues that an employee is experiencing barriers to their work or requires adaptations.

WHY DON'T EMPLOYEES DISCLOSE THEIR DISABILITIES?

- Processes aren't clear for when or how;

- They may have at one point, but their situations and needs have changed and there is a lack of connections or touchpoints across the employment cycle;

- There is distrust, fear or uncertainty about reactions, privacy concerns, a history of incidents not addressed, a lack of leadership, or misperceptions in their workplace;

- There is a disproportionate onus on employees to figure out systems, self-advocate and make clear suggestions for accommodations (a reactive accommodation process). This can be exhausting and time-consuming and communicates a lack of support; or

- Disclosure needs are informal within team relationships, or the culture is not welcoming to disability or disclosure.

Sometimes disability is only visible or experienced some of the time; this type of disability can be described as "episodic." For four out of five Canadians with disabilities, their primary or secondary health conditions are episodic, and one study of Canadian workers with episodic conditions found that over half of the workers surveyed experienced their first work limitation in a role in which they were already working. Approximately 61% of workers with episodic disabilities require at least one workplace accommodation (usually some kind of "soft accommodation" like telework or modified hours or duties) and most have some or all of their needs met. At least 20%, however, tend to have none of their needs met, and more than two thirds feel their episodic health condition makes it difficult to change jobs or advance in their careers, and feel that they experience a higher likelihood of discrimination.[30]

The statistics above appear to indicate that Canadian workplaces exhibit an inconsistent, reactive, and individualized approach to disclosure of disability and accommodations. Employees with disabilities are often expected to initiate getting the support they need to thrive in their roles, determine their exact needs for accommodation, and articulate them clearly—at which point, accommodations are provided for each need, as possible.

Participants in the Access Ability roundtables who represented workplaces with proactive approaches to inviting disclosure, providing accommodations or aspiring to accessible design felt that these more open workplace environments increase disclosures, job satisfaction and other metrics related to advancement and retention of employees with disabilities.

2. Ensure consistency of support across the employment cycle and across departments

Roundtable participants reported their sense that employers tend to provide the most support for accommodations and disclosure during hiring and recruitment processes, with less consistent support for disclosure after this point. By front-loading support, employers are often able to hire more people with disabilities. However, without ongoing, well-structured support through an employee's tenure, organizations may run into challenges with retention, career stagnation, performance challenges and disengagement among employees with disabilities. Roundtable participants urged that workplaces create an open and supportive culture and host informal conversations regarding disability, to create more comfortable disclosing opportunities outside of the formal conversations common during hiring.

Participants in the Access Ability roundtables also reported that the responsibility for disability inclusion, particularly accommodation and disclosure, can fall disproportionately on Human Resources, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) departments. Participants reported that although employees with disabilities may have positive experiences interfacing with the above departments, employees may have negative experiences if they encounter a lower level of disability inclusion from other departments. It is therefore crucial to employee wellbeing that disability inclusion be consistent throughout the organization.

Employers at the roundtables suggested that a lack of shared responsibility and scarcity of resources across departments contributes to lower trust in an organization's commitment to disability inclusion and accessibility. Ensuring that a commitment to disability inclusion is well-supported and spread across the organization—and that disability inclusion strategies are situated within a broader framework of organizational change and robust equity practices—would go a long way in creating a workplace that enabled employees to work to their full potential.

3. Tackle myths and provide accommodations proactively

Myths and misconceptions about disability—and how employers should respond to disability—abound in the workplace and contribute to a culture of exclusion.

Leaders who took part in the roundtables felt that addressing misconceptions and creating workplace culture change is particularly needed when it comes to return-to-work processes and accommodations for people with invisible disabilities, illnesses and injuries. When returning to work, employees are often met with insufficient accommodations and stigma (both overt and implicit) around injury or disability from co-workers, management or compensation boards.[31] Creating an open and positive workplace culture for these employees can create lasting improvements. For example, when steps are taken to improve

reintegration of workers experiencing mental health disabilities—such as assessing the work environment and improving mental health literacy in the workplace—workers may be more comfortable disclosing health challenges before they impact productivity. (Assessment may be an especially key practice among frontline managers who would first notice declines in performance.) [32]

Many myths and misunderstandings also surround the cost of accommodations. Accommodations are often simpler and less costly than imagined by managers and resource departments, but the perception that accommodations are costly seems to result in some employers and managers taking a reactive and hesitant approach to inviting and responding to them. Organizations should consider a proactive approach that provides resources in advance of need, such as creating centralized and set processes for meeting accommodations, and flexible and well-funded systems to tackle overlapping barriers. Roundtable participants particularly endorsed the idea of creating pools of resources to draw from when someone discloses a disability and requires accommodations; having these resources at the ready would remove the need for special, individual action to be taken.

4. Critically assess digital tools and the changing nature of work

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a huge number of workplaces have been forced to have their employees work remotely. This shift required different ways of working—such as remote work and flexible schedules—that employers or leaders had previously determined were not achievable or productive, but which in fact proved to be both.[33] Digital tools enabled this transformation, and the employers who participated in the roundtables expressed hope that digital tools and work-from-home conditions would improve accessibility and respond to new working opportunities and challenges for all employees.

Employers and employees with disabilities, however, cited the limits of digital tools in solving all accessibility needs and creating accommodating work environments, and refuted the myth that "more tech is more accessible."[34] For example, employers attending the roundtables admitted that while many workplaces adopted new digital tools during the pandemic, they may not have thoroughly vetted how disability inclusive and accessible those tools were, due to unsettled nature of work during that time. Roundtable participants expressed concern that that many of these digital tools may have been adopted out of convenience and incorporated without a robust evaluation of whether they are sufficient to the need or fit basic accessibility requirements, such as being usable with screen readers. Employers and employees with disabilities at the roundtables echoed this, noting that as some of these digital tools were implemented without thorough consideration of their accessibility, their adoption contributed to more complex and inaccessible work arrangements for employees with disabilities or their colleagues. Roundtable participants therefore urged that digital tools be carefully selected

and implemented to ensure that they create greater accessibility, rather than reinforce inequities.

The pandemic has also seen many employees work from home, where they were able to create a unique work atmosphere tailored to enable their greatest productivity. 85% of respondents of one study on remote work during the pandemic reported that they had "experienced good working conditions" while working from home.[35] Roundtable participants noted specific examples of good working conditions, such as how they had arranged their lighting, desk position, computer monitors, and other factors at home to positively impact their work experience. In effect, at-home workers were able to provide their own accommodations. Employers contemplating a complete or partial return to the office should ensure that these conditions can be replicated there.

In conversations about the changing nature of work, roundtable representatives also said that the remote work required by COVID-19 demonstrated that accommodations and accessibility are about more than just tools and infrastructure and "how we work." They are also about supporting social wellbeing, overall health and ability to thrive. For instance, employers cited the renewed importance of being socially connected and the need for equitable working arrangements. Similarly, employers noticed during the pandemic that conversations around mental health were more open and common in their workplaces, and in turn perceived a reduction of stigma around mental health struggles and a rise in mental health literacy and acceptance.

COVID-19 and workplace or business lockdowns required work arrangements, business models and activities to change, but also created conditions for many employers and employees to question assumptions towards disability and workplace support. Roundtable participants felt that employees without disabilities are now better able to relate to the experiences of people with disabilities and accept workplace supports. Participants also felt that the pandemic accelerated social acceptance in their workplaces around disability and a greater variety of ways of working, contributing to a workforce that was more ready and willing for a new "future of work" and for a more accessible future.

RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT OF EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES

What can organizations do to ensure employees with disabilities can thrive in their careers? How can employers' advancement, training and development systems contribute to equity and better business outcomes?

Canadian employers have made progress in hiring more people with disabilities. Significant gaps remain, however, in supporting the development and recognition of employees with disabilities. These gaps result in lower representation of employees with disabilities in leadership roles and in disproportionate representation in some jobs and career pathways. Equal representation across roles is a good indicator of an accessible organization—and future skills, competitiveness and inclusive culture. Fully including employees with disabilities entails ensuring they have equal and equitable opportunity to pursue and contribute to work according to their full range of abilities and aspirations. Committing to this broader goal is essential to achieving better outcomes in hiring, advancement, development and retention of employees with disabilities over the long term and empowering them to advance into leadership roles.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Collect data to better understand employee experience

Getting a full picture of the workplace experiences of employees with disabilities in Canada is challenging. What is clear is that employees with disabilities remain disproportionately underemployed, supported in some roles over others, and less represented in leadership, promotions and recognition opportunities.[36] This evidence suggests while employers now hire more employees with disabilities, those employers do not support these employees' retention, development and advancement. This can result in career stagnation and "cornering" of employees with disabilities—trends that are sometimes masked as successful indicators of retention.

Leaders need to know their employees to empower them. Roundtable participants felt that collecting organizational data can support the creation of better processes—but collecting and using data around equity, diversity and inclusion is, in general, a sensitive task.

It can also be challenging to coordinate, especially in larger organizations. Senior leaders in one organization reported that because data was collected by various departments and groups within the organization, but not shared or aggregated sufficiently to paint a picture of the status of inclusivity or progress on accessibility initiatives, it was challenging to stay on top of the latest picture of their organization's health regarding accessibility and disability inclusion.

Employers expressed another difficulty: not always having the right people, teams or tools to interpret collected data or general information in ways that did not simply reproduce inequities. For instance, if managerial teams interpret data without proper training around disabilities and accessibility, or with implicit myths about disability, information collected may end up reinforcing these myths.

Employers and disability advocates expressed learning the following lessons around data collection:

- Be intentional about the purpose of and return on investment of collecting data, and strive to build employee trust as part of the process;

- Make privacy, confidentiality and data security practices robust and transparent;

- Develop diverse opportunities for data and peer knowledge sharing;

- Engage everyone in developing models of data collection and selection;

- Interpret data with an intersectional and equity-based lens, and with validation from people from diverse perspectives; and

- Prioritize employee needs, comfort and empowerment through participation, choices and use of data.

2. Support career and skills progression and transitions

Employers at the roundtables validated the well-documented research findings[37] that myths and biases around disability can prevent organizations from investing in employees with disabilities for advancement and promotion. Roundtable participants also indicated that supports for transitions—such as when new business activities are introduced, teams change, or an employee advances—are lacking.

Organizations can support employees with disabilities in building skills and advancing in their careers by dismantling misperceptions and creating new, empowering structures. Clearly communicating core competencies for all roles early and in accessible formats[38] helps employees assess their own accommodation needs, fit to roles, and career paths within

organizations. Roundtable participants also noted that targeted approaches to developing and advancing employees with disabilities increase their success. Flexible approaches for performance management can be tailored to employees' unique strengths, abilities and goals to produce co-created career paths. These strategies are most successful when constructive, non-punitive and aimed at fostering employee growth and development.

Roundtable participants reported that using external resources for training are helpful in aiding employees with disabilities in achieving greater career success. Participants stipulated, however, that skills training opportunities should be accessible and flexible.

Roundtable participants also said that aiding employees with disabilities in making professional connections and creating career relationships can also support career advancement. Participants reported that mentorship, reverse mentorship and sponsorship tracks are effective tools that can be leveraged to create more professional support. These connections should be deliberately made and are especially beneficial when the mentor is a leader with personal experience of a disability as well.

Roundtable participants also indicated that times of transition provide new opportunities to support employees with disabilities. It is important, for example, that employers ensure that they have smooth return-to-work processes in place. Transitions that occur on a systems level—organizational transitions or changes in business activity, for example—are also moments to pause and assess whether these changes alter an employee's job, change the team culture, or affect supports in ways that could create inequity and hamper employees with disabilities in progressing in their careers.

KEY PRIORITY AREA #3

SUCCESSFUL APPROACHES TO DISABILITY INCLUSION

Where should employers looking to improve organizational practices start? What are some characteristics of successful strategies for disability inclusion?

The choices organizations make in how they design, implement and evaluate disability inclusion practices have a huge impact on their effectiveness. By co-creating strategies with a diversity of employees, linking disability equity goals with business aims, creating strong measurements that assess both quantitatively and qualitatively, and sharing learnings with

other organizations, employers have a better chance of achieving success with disability inclusion.

1. Engage a diverse group—especially employees with disabilities—to design actions

Access Ability roundtable participants reported that when organizations invite a diverse group of employees with disabilities to develop inclusion strategies, the group creates more successful actions, a base of common understanding around disability and a broader commitment to inclusion.

To enable employees to co-create disability inclusion strategies and goals, leaders should provide some background of universal or human-centred design and principles connected to "designing for the margins." Encouraging employees who are designing initiatives and measurements to concentrate on the experiences of those in the margins should result in the creation of equity-supporting actions that will cast a wide net and support all employees.

Engagement should also continue after the "start up" phase to provide continuous input on the organizations' progress towards inclusion. Employers should support the creation of support groups and empower them to contribute information, co-create initiatives, and assess success. Roundtable participants representing workplaces where these groups exist noted that leadership is often missing from these employee support and learning groups around disability. They indicated that people in leadership positions should be supported and encouraged to participate.

ON BUILDING TRUST

Creating and implementing equity initiatives requires that workplaces build trust, credibility, and transparency.

To create this trust, organizations should acknowledge the power dynamics (unwritten rules and understandings based on privilege and power that govern how people engage and interact) that exist within every workplace, to create open space for honest, authentic dialogue.

As it is impossible to do away with these power dynamics altogether, organizations should enhance the clarity and confidentiality of human resources processes and create effective channels for knowledge-sharing within the organization.

Organizations should also candidly assess their roles in society and their reactions to contemporary public issues. If an organization purports to stand for inclusion and equity and creates internal equity initiatives but does not deliberately carry forward these practices in its external business practices, its stance may appear partial or inauthentic. Likewise, if in its history the organization created or allowed inequity internally or externally, the impact those practices had on marginalized populations should be honestly assessed and publicly addressed.

2. Align and integrate equity with business goals

Roundtable participants felt that strategies for disability inclusion were most effective when they were directly linked to and integrated with an organization's core goals. Roundtable participants suggested, for instance, that organizations align disability inclusion goals with short- and long-term timelines of key business priorities or activities and consider accessibility to be an essential and requisite characteristic of products and services.

Roundtable participants indicated that failing to integrate disability inclusion with business activity can contribute to disability inclusion becoming siloed in certain departments or becoming an "off the side of the desk" initiative with lagging results.

Representatives from organizations that integrated their disability inclusion goals with the broader goals of the organization found this step to be central in preventing asymmetries such as:

- A lack of leadership support for disability inclusion initiatives;

- Gaps in resourcing disability inclusion equally across the organization or sites of work; and

- Over-reliance on Human Resources and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) groups to advance disability inclusion for the whole organization or in ways outside their scope (e.g. performance management, team communications, leveraging strengths of employees with disabilities towards specific business problems, client accessibility, etc.). Integration of disability inclusion goals in all departments supported scalability of, and shared responsibility for, these strategies and practices.

Roundtable participants from larger organizations reported a common pitfall: enacting disability inclusion strategies without considering how they might be adapted for the specific business goals of different workplace sites, departments and teams. These sweeping strategies implemented across large organizations lagged or failed due to communication issues and inconsistent support.

Roundtable participants also indicated that they had seen organizations successfully adopt externally developed commitments, campaigns and pledges for disability inclusion. They reported that these public and "borrowed goals" can help increase awareness of different disabilities in organizations and create a "critical mass" of disability confidence for organization-wide change. (Relatedly, employers expressed strong support for industry, sectoral or governmental "guideposts" for disability inclusion.) However, employers warned that initiatives based on public goals, pledges or commitments were unlikely to succeed if adopted without the required internal readiness, disability-confidence and organization-wide support to see them through.

3. Measure rigorously and often

Employers who participated in the roundtables reported that strategies for disability inclusion are often put in motion without clear timelines, milestones, or measurement and evaluation plans.

Some participants reported that while organizations usually have rigorous measurements in place to track business goals or the success of other equity initiatives, they lack the same rigour in measuring progress of disability inclusion initiatives. Others said that while employers may have metrics in place to track progress on disability inclusion, they often lack a strategy to use these learnings to alter, iterate on or improve their initiatives or goals moving forward.

Roundtable participants said that rather than creating their own evaluation measures, employers are increasingly adopting expertly developed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and tools related to disability inclusion (such as the Disability Equality Index for employers by Disability:In or the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy and its Accountability Framework). Many participants also expressed that they felt less confident creating their own evaluation measures during times of disruption—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—while business goals, practices and teams were changing. Participants supported the idea of governmental and cross-sector co-ordination to develop metrics and indicators for accessibility that consider and are adaptable for times of disruption. Participants also endorsed the idea of including disability inclusion as a core performance metric of leadership and management.

4. Share useful knowledge within and between organizations

Employers at the roundtables expressed the need for processes that encourage candid conversation, knowledge sharing and peer-accountability between leaders within organizations—but they called for the same between organizations to spur industry-wide change.

Employers felt that coalition-type networks across and within industries of employers who are committed to sharing successful strategies could be useful. Some noted, however, that organizations may be loath to share ideas for equity initiatives that give them a competitive advantage when attracting a diverse workforce. Some employers thought that initiatives to facilitate knowledge sharing would be more effective if they convened organizations from different industries to avoid the sticking point of inclusiveness as a competitive labour market advantage.

CONCLUSION

Making work accessible to employees with disabilities requires conscientious choices to examine assumptions about how, where, and when we work, as well as the goals of work and business. This requires learning about the abilities, needs and preferences of workers who haven't been part of the standard equation—and giving them seats at the table to design material, procedures, systems and goals.

Perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this often-forgotten truth about access needs and accommodations: everyone has them. The very meaning of an "ableist world of work" is that the needs of non-disabled people are mostly met by design. The pandemic's shake-up of business ruptured this design and revealed that intentionality is required to support each individual's productivity, communication, basic ergonomics, wellbeing at work and more.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a time of upheaval, loss and trauma. But as employers begin to roll out plans for a return to work, they have a unique opportunity to ask employees what conditions enable the greatest personal productivity and wellbeing for each person and create a future of work that is responsive to those conditions. A recurring topic at the Access Ability roundtables was the potential for the processes and culture change described in this report to create workplaces in which *all* employees feel heard, valued and supported.

Judging from the enthusiastic conversations at the roundtables, employers are ready and excited to help build an accessible future, starting with their own organizations. The Access Ability project involved employers from across Canada, in all sectors, who generously contributed their learnings from experience in trying to improve disability inclusion. Among the many learnings from this project, a few lessons in particular cut across the priority areas for change:

- High organizational and leadership motivations are essential but insufficient against long-standing systems. Concrete, operationalized strategies are required;

- Employees with disabilities, as the witnesses to organizational barriers that go unnoticed, have many of the answers; their perspectives should be centred to produce strategies that are better for everyone. Putting those strategies into action and ensuring they are supported, centred, and evaluated, however, must be everyone's responsibility and priority; and

- The dividends of accessibility and inclusion will be shared, more than expected, and sometimes differently than expected. Measuring progress should be continual, intentional and flexible.

Above all, the Access Ability research, engagement and employer experiences has validated that accessibility *is* the business case.
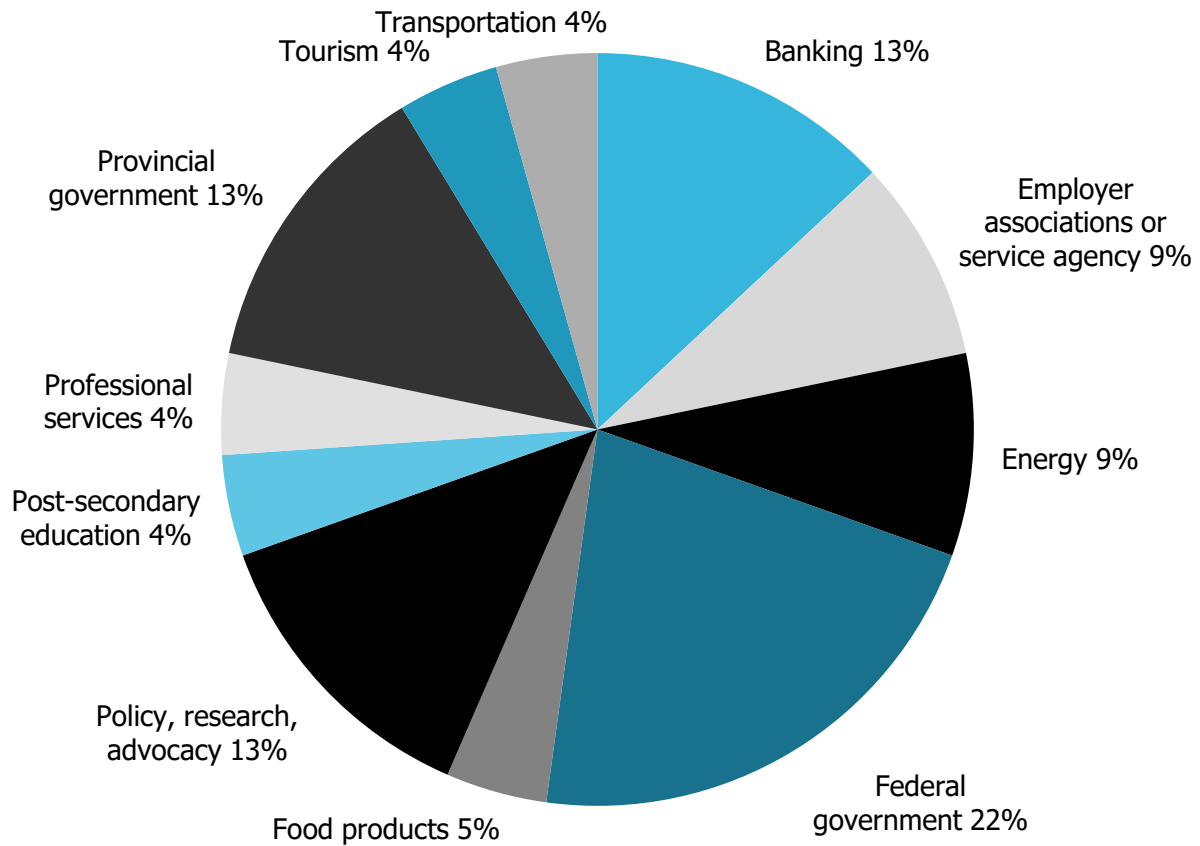
METHODOLOGY / EMPLOYERS CONSULTED

The Access Ability roundtable series (Feb. 3, 10, 17 and 24, 2021) gathered candid, qualitative input from a diversity of medium and large employers across Canada about their efforts to improve inclusion of employees with disabilities.

Each roundtable explored a Priority Area for Change. Representatives included executives and leaders from human resources, equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives and employees with disabilities across these roles. Policymakers, disability advocates and employer-supporting agencies were also consulted to scope the questions and clarify the issues.

Through the roundtables and consultation, the Access Ability network grew to more than 75 organizations in Canada representing public (35%), private (39%) and civic (26%) sector industries. Organizations represented a variety of commitments and requirements from various legislative contexts, regulations and standards. Consultations focused on identifying common challenges and opportunities, and on learning from these differences in ways that identified actionable items for employers (with or without external supports, legislative or policy resources) while keeping tabs on fruitful directions for public policy and employer supports.

Graph: The access ability network

Pie chart: "The access ability network"
- Banking 13%
- Employer associations or service agency 9%
- Energy 9%
- Federal government 22%
- Food products 5%
- Policy, research, advocacy 13%
- Post-secondary education 4%
- Professional services 4%
- Provincial government 13%
- Tourism 4%
- Transportation 4%

Description: the pie chart above groups the employers who were consulted in the Access Ability roundtable series by sector. 22% of employers consulted were from the federal government; 13% were from provincial governments; 13% were from policy, research and advocacy groups; 13% were from banking; 9% were from employer associations or service agencies; and 9% were from the energy sector. The remaining 21% were split between employers from the following sectors: food products, transportation, tourism, professional services and post-secondary education.

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[17] Such as the work in development by the Assembly of First Nations: https://www.afn.ca/policy-sectors/economic/empowering-first-nations-persons-with-disabilities/; Or, by organizations like the British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (BCANDS): http://www.bcands.bc.ca/.

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