



The Hidden Workforce: Creating An Inclusive and Accessible Workplace

Building an inclusive workplace involves considering the diverse talents and needs of all members of your workforce, even if these may not be apparent at first glance. Did you know that many workers in Canada identify as having a non-apparent disability? This can include but is not limited to those experiencing mental illness or autoimmune, neurological, or learning disabilities. Given that all workers' needs may not be apparent to employers and colleagues, this unseen population often faces increased discrimination resulting in further impacts to their well-being and increased turnover.

Did you know?

In a 2019 Ipsos survey, 75% of respondents said they would be reluctant or would not disclose a mental illness to an employer or co-worker. Respondents were nearly 3 times less likely to want to disclose a mental illness than a physical disability.

Research also shows that people experiencing chronic pain are 47% more likely to be subjected to threats and abuse in the workplace (Adams and Salomons).

Many of these workers do not disclose their disability or request workplace support due to fear of discrimination and past or current negative experiences. It is important to note that these workers are not attempting to hide their disability; instead, they are navigating additional workplace barriers.

Inclusive workplaces consider the needs and strengths of all workers to create welcoming and respectful environments where all workers thrive. An important part of inclusion is removing workplace barriers to improve accessibility. Consider the following accessible practices to foster inclusion at your workplace.

Increase Awareness and Knowledge

- Become familiar with respectful and inclusive language.

Helpful Terms

Unconscious bias: Unconscious bias is a collection of beliefs that shape our attitudes and actions toward others, even though we may not be aware of them.

Ableism: The unequal treatment of persons who experience disability through policies, systems, and attitudes that devalue and discriminate. Ableism results in oppression and social and economic exclusion.

Anti-ableism: Anti-ableism refers to policies and practices that identify and challenge beliefs, actions, and practices that devalue and/or discriminate against persons experiencing disability.

Mental Health: This is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, recognize and use their strengths, and learn and work well (World Health Organization). Social and economic inclusion promote mental health.

Accessibility: The removal of barriers that hinder or challenge the full participation of persons experiencing disability in the workplace. These barriers may include physical barriers, information barriers, attitudinal barriers, technological barriers, etc.

- Learn the terms or phrases that can increase stigma and be offensive and avoid generalizations where possible.
- Commit to person-centred language. Reflect how the employee chooses to self-identify.
- Offer anti-ableism training for all staff to assist in identifying and minimizing ableism and unconscious bias.

Commit to Inclusive Communications in Accessible Formats

- Ensure that all critical communications are offered in a variety of formats and stored in accessible places. For example, when sharing a companywide update, create an audio message and pin it in an internal channel for staff to reference when needed.

Create Opportunities for Open Conversation

- Meaningful dialogue occurs on a regular basis with all employees to ensure they have what they need to perform their job. Create multiple avenues for employees to provide input, such as anonymous online surveys, written/video/audio feedback, one-on-one conversations, etc.
- Learn how to facilitate a positive disability disclosure conversation. Check CASE's [complimentary online course](#).
- Provide regularly scheduled check-ins to explore what is working and what is not. This may result in discussion about disability disclosure, accommodations, or no-to-low-cost adjustments.

What is the difference between “accommodations” and “adjustments”?

Accommodation is a means of preventing and removing barriers in the workplace, in a way that is responsive to an individual's unique circumstances. Accommodations can refer to any equipment, practices, or policies that remove workplace barriers.

Adjustment is a slight change to a work task or process to increase job satisfaction. Everyone needs workplace adjustments based on their work style and strengths.

Resources on Creating an Inclusive and Accessible Workplace

- Explore short online courses for employers:
 - [Accessible Communications](#)
 - [Supporting Disability Disclosure](#)
 - [Inclusive Recruitment](#)
- [HR Inclusive Policy Toolkit](#): Offers a step-by-step review of inclusive policies and practices.
- [Employer Resources](#): Offers helpful resources and information for employers.

If you require more information, connect with your local supported employment service provider. To locate a provider near you, [visit the CASE website](#).