



**Do The Rights Thing:
Deaf and Disabled Women and
Gender-Diverse People and the World of Work**

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Executive Summary

Accessible workforces can increase the social inclusion and independence of Deaf and disabled women. Yet, within the Canadian workforce, equal access to gainful employment is not a right afforded to all.

This position paper identifies and addresses physical and cultural barriers that impede Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people from securing and maintaining employment. Of primary concern is the lack of accessible, reliable, and affordable transportation across the nation. Transportation is a prerequisite to accessing employment. Inaccessible public and private transportation systems are physical barriers that have been shown to expose women and gender-diverse people to gender-based violence, social isolation, and poverty. Later, we address how the myth of the 'ideal' employee is an ableist cultural barrier that limits how productivity and competence can be expressed in the workforce.

For working Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people, inclusive employment practices, policies, and structures are needed now. The social and economic benefits afforded by equitable workspaces are advantageous for both employees and employers. It is for this reason that this paper provides a business case as well as directives for employers, colleagues, community organizations, and self-advocates alike on how to advocate for better employment practices and policies that are responsive to the needs of Deaf disabled and gender-diverse people and women. Specifically, by highlighting best practices that showcase successful employment initiatives and supports that have made a positive impact on the employment experiences of Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people. This paper aims to empower advocacy and develop meaningful strategies that support Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people to navigate the world of work more effectively.

DAWN Canada

DAWN Canada (DisAbled Women's Network) is dedicated to advancing the rights and inclusion of women with disabilities, particularly those with intersecting identities. Founded in 1985, DAWN Canada is an intersectional feminist human rights organization that works to address systems of oppression. Our mission is to end the poverty, isolation, discrimination and violence experienced by women and gender-diverse people with disabilities, including those who are Deaf.

Since 2017, DAWN Canada's "Do The Rights Thing" initiative has directly addressed the experiences of specific populations within the disability community, particularly women and youth with disabilities when it comes to employment. Our ongoing work involves both new and existing research on the barriers faced by women with disabilities, particularly those from marginalized communities. This current iteration of our "Do The Rights Thing" initiative, specifically examines the challenges faced by Deaf and disabled women in the workforce, providing valuable insights that inform our position on employment inclusion in the current landscape.

Our research and advocacy efforts consider historical and current contexts affecting employment outcomes for women and gender-diverse people with disabilities. This includes examining systemic, cultural, and personal barriers to employment, which are key priority areas of the position paper. By identifying barriers through an intersectional lens that considers these complex socioeconomic factors, our research aims to address and identify key gaps in employment and livelihood accessibility for diverse women and gender-diverse people with disabilities, who represent 30 percent of all working age (18-64 years old) Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2022).

We are committed to providing actionable recommendations for improving employment supports and sharing best practices. Through our various projects and partnerships, we have developed strategies and case studies that demonstrate effective approaches to supporting individuals with disabilities in the workforce. A core element of our work is empowering Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people.

Do The Rights Thing: Deaf and Disabled Women and Gender-Diverse People and the World of Work

Accessible workplaces with inclusive hiring and employment practices are required to dismantle employment barriers experienced by women and gender-diverse people living with disability. First passed into law in 2019, the *Accessible Canada Act [ACA] C-10* promises a barrier-free nation for all, with particular attention to people with disabilities, by 2040. Of note is the Canadian government's commitment to not only address but also dismantle systemic, cultural, and personal barriers found in the workforce (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2025). As Inclusion Canada (2020) rightfully asserts, creating a law protecting the rights of Canadians with disabilities is but a 'first step' of many on the road to providing equal access to work. While the federal government has set a clear timeline and commitment, what is necessary to facilitate this process is a thoughtful consideration of the conditions of our labour market to better address the evolving needs and experiences of Canadian workers with disabilities.

The reality in 2025 is that the Canadian labour market remains riddled with ableist employment practices. Ableist employment practices are not only reflected in the lived experiences of women and gender-diverse people with disability but also in the rates of unemployment and underemployment. In 2023, Daniel Vergara and Vincent Hardy (2024) found that unemployment rates were 7.6% among people with disability, a rate that is 3% higher when compared to nondisabled Canadians. This contrast in unemployment rates are even more stark when considering the intersection of gender and disability. Employment rates among nondisabled women who fall between 25-52 years of age are 11.3% higher when compared to their age mates with disabilities (Vergara & Hardy, 2024). People without disabilities are also paid an average of \$1.91 more each hour than their peers with disabilities. While the data above reflects the rates of unemployment and underemployment, what is missing behind these numbers is an understanding of how these barriers are created and maintained. to engage the full participation of women and gender-diverse people in the workforce.

Employers must act now to address workforce inequities. Investing in a workplace rooted in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)—one that meets the needs of all employees—offers immeasurable returns (Palumbo, 2025). We believe that inclusive employment practices that address disability alone is not enough. The solutions required to remedy the physical, systemic, and cultural barriers that make navigating the workforce more challenging must also consider the intersecting and diverse realities of the disabled community. The fair treatment of all employees cannot occur without first dismantling of racist, misogynistic and ableist structures in the workforce. Without this employers fail to address the varied realities lived by their workers

that translate into struggles in a normative and ableist workplace. Companies and organizations should be incentivized to adopt DEI models given economic and social advantages (Fisher & Connelly, 2020). Employers with strong DEI strategies have higher employee retention (Fisher & Connelly, 2020) and are shown to promote a workspaces where employees feel valued (Wright, 2022). Centering the needs of Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people in the DEI movement through equitable hiring results in positive social and economic benefits for employers.

Here, we review some barriers that create inequitable practices, impeding Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people from fully participating in the Canadian workforce. More specifically, we offer an analysis of the physical, systemic, and cultural barriers unique to women and gender-diverse people with disability that beget these systems of oppression. Next, we discuss inclusive employment practices and the impetus for creating an accessible workforce. After this, we provide a roadmap showcasing best practices as suggested by scholars as well as disability and employment organizations. To encourage women and gender-diverse people with disability, we offer suggestions for self-advocating to promote more inclusive employment standards.

Physical Barriers: The Need for Accessible, Affordable, and Safe Transport Services to Secure Employment

In Canada, most public transportation systems are not fully accessible. As a result, Canadian urban and rural spaces often do not meet the accessibility requirements for people with limited mobility, a feature that is disabling by design. Mahtot Gebresselaissie (2023) reminds us that a lack of disabled accessibility services within public transportation systems not only limits one's mobility to access essential services but employment as well. The ability to access places of employment through adapted and affordable transportation services, as the Affordable Action Council (2024) suggests, "enhances the resilience of communities" (p. 5). We extend this sentiment to also declare that affordable and accessible transportation options can enhance the resilience of women and gender-diverse people with disability. More accessible public transportation bridges a social divide by physically connecting community members to economic and social opportunities they would have otherwise not been able to reach. Accessible public transportation is a community support that leaves its members, especially Deaf women and gender-diverse people with disabilities who are often excluded stronger.

Access to employment for women and gender-diverse people with disability can create a pathway to better self-esteem, financial independence (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2024) and enhanced social inclusion (Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work,

2024). The workforce is a natural milieu for people with and without disabilities to socialize, learn and develop skills, and feel a sense of accomplishment (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2018). Conversely, where access to employment is limited by public transportation, particularly in rural, remote, or northern regions of Canada, Indigenous women, girls, people with disability, and members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community are at a greater risk of living in poverty (Levesque, 2022; Quinlan, 2018), experiencing social isolation and being subjected to physical harm (Canadian Institute for Inclusion and Citizenship, 2023). The importance of accessible public transportation for people with disabilities, particularly as it relates to their ability to socially and economically engage with their communities is clear. Yet, most regions within Canada do not have the transportation infrastructure needed to support women and gender-diverse people with disabilities travelling to and from work.

Simply put, almost all public transportation services within Canada present a physical barrier to people with disabilities. In Atlantic Canada, the region with the highest rates of disability and unemployment in the nation, Levesque (2022) plainly states that accessible public transport is “largely missing” (p. 689). Atlantic Canadians with disabilities are met with government austerity that limits accessible transit services, leaving those without private modes of transportation unable to travel within the region for everyday activities such as employment (Levesque, 2022). Meanwhile, if we were to consider the greater Montréal area, Marie-Soleil Cloutier (as cited by Dayan-Perez, 2024) found that only 25% of the 22,000 bus stops in the region can be classified as safe and walkable for service users. What is worse, only 46% of the jobs in Montreal and 75% of the jobs in Toronto accessible to non-wheelchair users can also be accessed via public transit to people in wheelchairs (Grisé et al., 2019). Other physical barriers that have been identified by researchers include, but are not limited to, the following:

Lack of wheelchair-accessible vehicles (WAVs) for riders who need to remain in the wheelchair while travelling; poor service for those using non-foldable wheelchairs; unreliability of WAV service; non-equivalent service (e.g., longer wait times for WAV service); lack of assistance from drivers; and inadequate training of drivers (Gresselassie, 2023, p.1164).

It is important to note that in areas with a more robust public transportation system, options beyond subways, conventional buses, and streetcars exist for commuters with disabilities who require access to those services. Namely, para-transit bus services, a mode of transportation that complements conventional transit services with door-to-door wheelchair-accessible vehicles. However, although para-transit services are necessary and physically accessible, Emily Grisé et al. (2019) indicate that the scheduling required to book the service presents limitations to travellers seeking freedom in mobility. This can present problems for workers with disabilities who have shift-based roles, work in locations not accessible to para-transit routes, or require

last-minute transportation as a result of changes that are beyond their control (e.g., weather, scheduling changes, additional tasks being assigned at work).

On the other hand, private mobility options such as taxi cabs, Uber, Lyft, and other app-hailed transportation offer the convenience not granted by the para-transit service at a costly price (Gebresselassie, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). For women and gender-diverse people with episodic disabilities, travelling in private transportation services can be a health risk if the driver is not equipped to provide medical interventions (Canadian Transportation Agency, 2020). A problem that is not present in many public transportation spaces as drivers and operators are encouraged to receive training used to manage basic health emergencies covered by cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and First Aid. The service gap in transportation options available forces many Canadian workers with disabilities to choose between a mode of transportation that is either accessible, safe, reliable, or affordable.

Beyond the day-to-day hurdles imposed on citizens with disabilities, inaccessible transportation systems are a barrier that hinders commuters with physical impairments from accessing and maintaining employment opportunities. An accessible and gender-responsive public transportation system must also consider the risks of experiencing gender-based violence (GBV) while commuting. More specifically, there is an elevated risk for women travelling on public transit to experience unwanted sexual assault (CBC News, 2014) and harassment than men (WomenACT, 2022; YWCA, 2023). GBV on transit systems experienced by Deaf and/or women and gender-diverse people with disabilities can also manifest in different forms. For instance, there have been multiple reports in Canada of public and private transportation systems rejecting service to Deaf women in the presence of their guide dogs (Femia, 2024, Judd & Musconi, 2024). A safe, reliable, and accessible city is a prerequisite for women and gender-diverse people with disabilities to fully participate in their communities. In an interview celebrating the retrofitting of Montréal's Mont-Royal station, Marie-Eve Veilleux gives us a glimpse at what this change means for her, stating, "As a disabled citizen, it's been long — very, very long. Finally having access by myself to the 7eten, it's so much more freedom, so much more belonging to Montreal." (para.17, 2022). The development of accessible and affordable mobility options is needed to support independent and convenient travel for women and gender-diverse people with disabilities accessing the workforce. In the next section, we consider an equally fundamental barrier, cultural barriers and the negative impact they can have on disabled women and gender-diverse people in the workforce.

Cultural Barriers: The Myth of the 'Ideal Employee'

Ableist attitudes and beliefs held by society, colleagues, and employers stigmatize women and gender-diverse people with disability. This section explores how ableism in the form of societal attitudes and stereotypes is disabling employees with impairments in the workforce. More

specifically, we look at how the production of ableist organizational spaces, as Koen Van Laer and colleagues (2020) convey, ‘disables the independence, productivity, social inclusion, physical comfort, and safety’ of employees with impairments’ (p. 1018). Disability scholars argue that ableism is deeply rooted within organizational spaces. We are concerned with the workforce as an organizational space through which disability is produced and maintained. This concern is compounded by other social built, and natural environments that perpetuate a larger ableist world.

The workforce is built to maximize the potential of the ‘ideal employee’, a prototype largely centered around qualities and characteristics, be it real or perceived, aligned with the ‘typical’ or able-bodied man. Historically, the organizational structure of the workforce, along with accommodations, are built around a very specific type of disabled person that is not reflective of all impairments, let alone considerate of other social identities at the intersection of disability. As a result, body variations and abilities that fall outside of the perceived norm are seldom considered in a workplace’s designs, ideas, and practices. What, then, can be made of a workforce that is socially and physically built without consideration of the abilities and lived experiences of *all* employees? Van Laer et al. (2020) answer that what is being constructed is a system where people with disabilities are made to feel inferior and are othered in the workforce. In other words:

Individuals with impairments become disabled as participation on the labour market requires them to perform jobs defined and designed ‘against’ their bodies in terms of (for instance) speed, flexibility, and strength. In relation to these jobs, individuals with impairments become considered as lacking the capabilities considered ‘necessary for maximally productive workers’, causing them to be seen as inferior employees by employers and to suffer negative career effects (Van Laer et al., 2020, p. 1020).

The workforce, as Van Laer et al. (2020) explain, is modelled around the success of able-bodied employees, thereby requiring differently abled individuals to adapt to the organizational spaces rather than the organizational spaces adapting around them. This creates an organizational space that does not allow for the full range of abilities and capacities of people with disabilities to be shown. How is ableism experienced by people with disabilities? Stigmatizing assumptions as to what employees with disabilities can and cannot do have resulted in people with disabilities being forced to conform and adapt to ableist spaces and performance standards. Able-bodied spatial practices disable the productivity and independence of workers with disabilities (Kwon & Archer, 2022; Van Laer et al., 2020). It is also necessary to recognize that employees might be socially excluded in instances where accommodations are granted. For instance,

The organizational spaces can disable the social inclusion of employees with Impairments by causing segregation from their co-workers. This often involves reasonable accommodations that force them to perform a space in a segregated way or remove them from spaces where they are less productive (Van Laer et al., 2020, p. 1026).

It is vital to reckon with the ways organizational solutions that are intended to remedy the lack of attentiveness paid to ability can contribute to the decline in the social experiences of disabled people. When organizational spaces are not reflective of the needs of disabled people, it can hinder a disabled worker's independence, subsequently resulting in a constructed dependence to maintain the status quo. The constructed dependence then acts as a barrier to productivity and the success of workers with disabilities, which poses a threat to the safety of the worker and is physically as well as socially uncomfortable (Canadian Institute for Inclusion and Citizenship, 2023; Van Laer et al., 2020).

A truly productive employee is any worker who can exercise their skills and abilities while working in a positive social setting. Instead, to be considered productive, employees with disabilities face high-performance expectations and tasks that are often not built with the consideration of their abilities in mind (Kwon & Archer, 2022). The Canadian Institute for Inclusion and Citizenship (2023) confirms that employers who lack an understanding of the strengths and abilities of their employees are a barrier for people with intellectual disabilities in the workforce. In recent years, a lot of momentum has been built within disability scholarship and grassroots movements to chip away at and break down cultural and physical barriers found in the workspace. This is why we need clear recommendations for accessible hiring, retention, and advancement opportunities in support of Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people in navigating the workplace.

Advocating for Inclusive Employment Practices

Improving the employment standards of Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people requires a transformation of workplace structures. As discussed earlier, a lack of 'disability confidence' is frequently cited within the literature as a common barrier that prevents the full social inclusion of Deaf employees and/or employees with impairments (Lindsay et al., 2019). Workforces that lack disability knowledge and awareness have been shown to create an unsupportive and unwelcoming environment for workers with disabilities (Canadian Heritage, 2020; Lindsay et al., 2019). So much so that Vornholt et al. (2013) warn that "A lack of social acceptance by nondisabled co-workers is often the reason why employees with disabilities fail to stay in regular organizations for sustained periods" (p. 463). More recently, in the Canadian Institute for Inclusion and Citizenship (CIIC) (2023) survey, all of the respondents (i.e., self-advocates, employers, and employment specialists) listed knowledge and awareness in their top

three priorities for fostering strong interpersonal workplace relationships. The importance and responsibility of employers and colleagues play in the short-term and long-term integration of workers with disabilities is indisputable and necessary.

It is paramount for employers and colleagues to be aware of the challenges, stigmas, and stereotypes faced by employees with disabilities. This knowledge can equip employers and colleagues with the disability confidence needed to create and maintain a supportive work culture that considers the abilities of employees with disabilities, allowing disabled people to fully integrate into the workforce with acceptance beyond assimilation. The impetus for change is clear. When employers value accessibility, they are investing in a stronger, more inclusive, and welcoming environment for everyone. Without a built and social environment that is barrier-free, the successful integration and long-term retention of employees with disabilities are threatened. Unfortunately, the path towards creating a barrier-free workplace is a burden often shouldered by Deaf and/or disabled women and gender-diverse people in the workforce.

For many Deaf and/or disabled women and gender-diverse people, advocating for inclusive employment practices is a laborious task with great risk and little reward.

The burden of acquiring reasonable accommodations often falls on Deaf and/or disabled workers, despite the legal obligation of employers to make accommodations (Government of Canada, 2024). Unfortunately, although many years have passed since the release of Dr. Haley Gienow-McConnell's (2019) initial 'Do the Rights Thing' report, their words regarding the decision between ensuring your employment rights and liberties are respected or maintaining your job 10tentioy still hold true. Gienow-McConnell (2019) pens,

Though they have cause to dispute such legal violations, many of our participants have chosen to work around these violations, rather than 'upsetting the apple cart'. This tension between a strong desire to work, and the belief that they are entitled to be reasonably accommodated by their employer, has left these Deaf and/or disabled workers frustrated. They feel disempowered and discouraged having to compromise their needs and rights out of fear or unemployment (p. 7).

This sentiment is echoed in a testimony shared by one participant retelling their experience following an accommodation request made to their employer. The participant stated,

Working in the public service sector, and having requested an accommodation process has only resulted in negative experiences. I have had to get multiple doctor's notes and clarification letters regarding my limitations at work. My employer has forced accommodations on me that I did not agree to, and...which I had indicated made my health worse...The accommodation process was consuming; it affected my life outside of

work. Thankfully, my workplace has a union, so my union has been and is involved in almost every meeting with management now. (Gienow-McConnell, 2019, p. 21)

In theory, accommodations exist to create an equitable workforce by offering practical and material solutions that are reflective of the unique and diverse abilities of the employee(s) making the request. In practice, however, we can see through the participant's experience that when accommodations are ignored, incomplete, or incorrect, they create additional barriers in the workforce instead of reducing them. In this instance, the barrier was partly created by the employer requiring the employee with disabilities to provide a sick note to receive accommodations. Mandating employees to provide sick notes places undue pressure on those who may not have the financial means or ability to obtain medical documentation, often forcing them to return to work while still unwell. This practice not only undermines employee well-being but also highlights a broader systemic issue. As the participant recounted, many employers demonstrate a lack of flexibility and, at times, outright refusal to accommodate workers' health needs. This reflects a widespread and deeply entrenched challenge faced by employees with disabilities, who frequently encounter barriers to securing the workplace support they require.

When considering the provision of accommodations during the hiring and training of employees with disability, Canadian Heritage (2020) found that concerns over the money spent on resources and time required to hire and retain workers with disability was a concern shared by many employers. Conversely, in a project aptly titled 'Equal Access', the CIIC (2023) interviewed self-advocates with intellectual disabilities, employers, and employment experts on the working conditions of people with disabilities. When the topic of accommodations was broached, one self-advocate dispelled the concerns voiced by many employers, sharing,

People have the idea that accommodation means like, huge, huge, huge things. Often, it's making visuals out of manuals, things like that...Which helps the person who is the natural support or whoever is around them, as well as the person's roles and other employees, right? (CIIC, 2023, p. 7)

Support accommodations, as the participant describes, are concrete actions, be it small or large, taken on by the employer to respond to the needs of Deaf and/or disabled and gender-diverse people and women. Creating an inclusive workplace through the use of accommodations such as the 'visual manual' and other 'natural supports' offered to employees with disabilities allows for the successful integration and retention of all workers, thereby creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce. However, accommodations are one piece of the puzzle when considering what is needed to create a just and equitable labour market. This begs the question of what else employers can do to strengthen the recruitment and retention strategies to support prospective or current employees and develop a workforce that is reflective of the abilities of all Canadians.

The answers, as CIIC (2023) tells us, can be categorized into three categories: education, communication, and finally, providing resources, which will be further explored in the next section.

Showcasing Best Practices

A more equitable and inclusive labour market is grounded in education and empowers workers by meeting their needs and demands. The development of equitable workplace practices requires the exchange of knowledge, experience, and collaboration of all the primary actors (i.e., self-advocates, non-disabled colleagues, employers, policymakers and community organizations). In their quest to find disability and employment best practices, Stanley Smits (2004) tasks primary actors with the responsibility to set, maintain, and protect employment practices. Shifting the social, physical, as well as cultural standards in the

workforce demands that best practices be intersectional. Missing in the conversation of best practices for employees with disabilities, however, is a consideration of the unique and diverse ways that both disability and gender impact the employment experience for those in or seeking to enter the workforce. As a remedy, this section will modify and adapt the best practices listed below to also account for gender as well as disability. Our best practices list will be modelled by *The Inclusive Workplace's* (2025) guide, which names education, communication, and resources as the medium through which accessibility in the workforce can be achieved.

Education

Disability and gender education equip employers and coworkers to challenge their ableist and misogynist misconceptions and beliefs. Knowledge of disability in workplaces can provide employers and colleagues alike with the 'disability confidence' needed to engage in material and social practices catered toward dismantling ableist norms in the workforce. Self-advocates must lead and create this education to ensure that their lived experiences and needs are at the forefront of the movement. Although this movement will be led by Deaf and/or women and gender-diverse people with disabilities, the responsibility to learn and apply educational support is for all primary actors, namely hiring directors, coworkers, and management staff at every stage of the employment process (e.g., hiring, onboarding, and promotional phase).

At the hiring phase, it is recommended that employers uphold the following educational best practices: require gender and disability bias training for hiring managers, create gender and disability confident hiring teams to mitigate hiring bias, and partner with disability employment specialists to allow for the smooth transfer of relevant information between self-advocates and employers. During the onboarding and employment phase, it is recommended to create an explanation sheet outlining expectations and suggestions on how to support

coworkers/employees with their respective disabilities. Education can also be modelled by having people with disabilities represented at various levels of the organization (The Inclusive Workplace, 2025). By having disability representation in the workforce, employees who are disabled and non-disabled alike can challenge implicit bias (Derbyshire et al., 2023) while demonstrating a commitment to inclusive employment practices on behalf of the employer (De Raaf, 2023). Disability representation also creates natural opportunities to exchange knowledge and tips on overcoming barriers and succeeding in their roles (CIIC, 2023). For employers with a disability/disabilities seeking to advance in employment, educational best practices such as providing clear and explicit details of the requirements needed to grow in their position are suggested. A commitment to inclusion cannot begin without a commitment to understanding.

Communication

In 2021, Meagan Gillmore (2021) wrote, “It’s not good design if it’s not accessible” (n.p). An effective motto that should guide the organizational structures and practices in the workforce. Without accessibility at the forefront of programming designs, employers effectively prevent workers with disability from being able to actively engage in the workforce at a social, material, and physical level. All employment material (e.g., organizational hiring material, designs, curricula, etc.) needs to have multiple prototypes that are tested by people with varying abilities to make products, structures, and programs accessible the first time (Gillmore, 2021). Building toward an accessible workforce, however, requires an iterative approach that adapts to the diverse communication and learning styles of the employees (Reynders et al., 2024).

For primary actors, the iterative process needed to create best practices means designing and redesigning materials to meet the growing and evolving needs of employees with disabilities. The goal is for employers to develop a catalogue of all information communicated, available in accessible mediums and using plain language. For instance, among workers who are better able to retain instructions non-verbally and outside of written texts, it is recommended to use visual supports or behavioural prompts (Reynders et al., 2024). The challenge without accessible communication methods, as highlighted in a testimony shared by Deaf, is exclusion. She explains,

One problem I have is listening to phone messages. Luckily, I was able to add voicemail-to-text on my cellphone and left a message on my work phone to call my cellphone. It only translates the first minute of audio, but it’s enough to let me know if I need to return the call right away or if it can wait. I also have difficulty hearing in noise. So, [while working] I have to speak up and ask for TVs to be turned off, etc, in order to hear. I did get an FM system for use with clients, but it was awkward to ask them to wear a microphone...I have a new car that has Apple Car Play, so I can hear the audio through my car speakers [with my cochlear implant]. Unfortunately, there is no funding available

for buying a new car! There is also occasionally training online with audio. I have to advocate for myself to have a transcript of the audio (Gienow-McConnell, 2019, p. 7).

Innovation is required of self-advocates in workforces where communication is not accessible. The self-advocate was forced to request an accommodation for communications support to conduct her work. This could have been prevented if effective communication strategies for Deaf workers had been considered in the design of her role. Outside of the workforce, we suggest that community organizations create peer support groups for women and gender-diverse seeking employment and/or workers with disabilities to create opportunities to exchange creative solutions in the absence of accessibility. Navigating Barriers through peer support groups also allow for women and gender-diverse people with disability to express and share their thoughts and feelings while navigating their jobs/ the job market. Inside the workforce, employers should create regular opportunities for staff to provide feedback and welcome it if it occurs spontaneously to prevent the burden of addressing communication barriers from falling solely on the employees (Reynders et al., 2024). Communication also extends to the delivery of performance of expectations. Performance reviews and expectations outlined by the employer should be adapted to better suit the abilities and capacities of the employee in question (CIIC, 2023; The Inclusive Workplace, 2025). Most importantly, the path to dismantling communication barriers in the workforce demands that employers “Listen when people with disabilities speak” (Gienow-McConnell, 2019, p. 29). Accommodation supports are only as good as we allow them to be, and without the reoccurring collaboration from all actors, growth will not continue to occur.

Resources

Employers must invest in resources to develop equitable working standards for women and gender-diverse people with disability across all stages of the employment spectrum. These resources call for a financial commitment made by employers to actualize the best practices outlined throughout this paper. The CIIC (2023) argue that improving employment standards for women and gender-diverse people with disability means “More money...in all areas. Employers need money to help them pay their workers better wages. They need money to change their workplaces. They need money to do training” (p. 11). Building toward an inclusive and intersectional workforce demands an adaption of existing organizational structures while building toward an accessible future.

Inclusive employment approaches support women and gender-diverse people with disabilities by developing equitable onboarding, retention, and development practices. According to De Raff et al. (2023), accessible and inclusive employment approaches are built upon four pillars: i) commitment, ii) recruitment, iii) readiness, and iv) retention.

When supporting diverse work talent, employers must invest in the professional development of employees by creating a foundation of accessibility. For example, employers can create Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) roles or partner with external disability strategy organizations to ensure that organizational frameworks and practices are not only developed but also respected (Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work, n.d.). When considering recruitment, employment and disability best practices suggest pooling from a diverse group of candidates, partnering with disability employment specialists to ensure equitable hiring practices, adopting a variety of interview styles and techniques, advertising job postings through various mediums, and using plain language for role descriptions.

The readiness of an employer is measured by the organization's preparedness to support intersectional work talent and dismantle oppressive work structures. With time, a 'ready' employer has integrated DEI infrastructure within the fabric of the company's policies and expectations. This can take shape by employers adopting accommodations that suit the varying needs and realities of their employees. Examples include but are not limited to allowing parents to work from home, providing funding for transportation to ensure the safe travels of women and gender-diverse people with disabilities, adding visual alerts and signals in the workspace for Deaf employees, or retrofitting office space to prevent physical barriers. As for retention, this consists of facilitating the employment journey and career advancement of workers with disabilities.

The retention of employees with disabilities depends on equal opportunities for growth as well as clearly defined and adapted performance expectations because "equitable outcomes depend on equitable opportunities to reach them" (The Inclusive Workplace, 2025, n.p). To assist with diverse talent retention, asking questions such as "What are your career goals, and what tools do you require to reach them?" or "What does a successful and supportive management team look like to you?" can be of assistance. Employers are encouraged to provide regular check-ins with employees who have disabilities to ensure that accommodations are met. For quality assurance, another best practice would be to allow for the submission of spontaneous feedback made by workers with disabilities. Feedback submissions create opportunities for employers and employees to work together to adjust accommodations and create new supports when needed. The provision of inclusive resources allows for women and gender-diverse people seeking to enter or are already in the labour market to succeed and fully participate as employees.

Advocating for Inclusive Employment Practices

Some of us can contort ourselves, to varying degrees, to meet requirements designed to weed us out; we are called high-functioning — the polite term for someone who can adjust to widespread ideals of normalcy, generally at a cost to their own mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Visible or not, some of us simply cannot bend. (De Raff et al., 2023, p. 1).

Deaf and/or women and gender-diverse people with disabilities deserve accessible, safe and gainful employment. Navigating employment rights is a challenging but not impossible feat. Although it is the responsibility of employers to provide accommodations, it is up to women and gender-diverse people with disability to guide the demands for a gender and ability-inclusive workforce. We encourage self-advocates to educate themselves on their workplace rights and protections, communicate their needs for improving their employment standards, and request the resources required to enhance navigating the workplace. This self-advocacy can be bolstered by fostering peer support and mentorship networks to provide ongoing support and guidance for Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people. Remember to enforce your employment rights, partner with employment specialists, and share your experiences with others.

Future Directions and Conclusion

Conclusion

Employment remains a fundamental pillar of social inclusion and economic security, yet for Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people in Canada, systemic barriers continue to limit access to meaningful work. Despite legislative advancements like the Accessible Canada Act (ACA), ableist employment practices, inaccessible transportation, and rigid workforce expectations persist, reinforcing cycles of social and economic exclusion. Addressing these issues requires a shift in both policy and practice—one that not only acknowledges barriers but actively dismantles them. Employers, policymakers, community organizations, and self-advocates must collectively work toward reimagining an inclusive labour market that recognizes and values diverse expressions of productivity and competence. By implementing equitable hiring practices, ensuring accessible infrastructure, and shifting workplace cultures to be more inclusive, we can move toward a future where Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people are fully supported in their right to work.

Steps Forward

To advance employment inclusion for Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people, targeted and sustained action is necessary. The following steps outline key areas for future focus:

1. Expanding Accessible and Affordable Transportation Options

- a) Advocate for investments in public and private transportation systems that prioritize accessibility including for those who use mobility aids.
- b) Develop policies that ensure transportation services meet the needs of rural and urban disabled populations.
- c) Address safety concerns by integrating gender-based violence prevention strategies into transit planning.

2. Challenging Ableist Workplace Norms

- a) Promote flexible work arrangements, including remote and hybrid work, as standard practice.
- b) Redefine productivity beyond ableist assumptions, recognizing the diverse ways that individuals contribute to the workforce.
- c) Provide ongoing disability competency training for employers, hiring managers, and coworkers.

3. Enhancing Employment Support Programs

- a) Strengthen peer support networks and mentorship programs that assist Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people in navigating employment barriers.
- b) Expand funding for initiatives like DAWN's *Do The Rights Thing* project to further research and advocacy on employment inclusion.
- c) Encourage partnerships between disability organizations, employers, and policymakers to co-develop solutions that address employment inequities.

4. Policy and Legislative Advocacy

- a) Ensure stronger enforcement of the ACA and provincial accessibility laws by holding employers accountable for compliance
- b) Advocate for wage equity policies that eliminate pay gaps for disabled workers.
- c) Support the development of national employment strategies that center the needs of disabled women and gender-diverse people, particularly those from intersecting marginalized communities.

5. Empowering Self-Advocacy and Peer-Based Community-Led Change

- a) Provide resources and training for individuals to advocate for their rights in the workplace.
- b) Foster opportunities for disabled-led organizations to shape employment policies and practices.
- c) Promote storytelling and knowledge-sharing to shift public perceptions and workplace cultures.
- d) Peer support and mentorship from groups through peer support networks

By committing to these steps, Canada can move closer to fulfilling the promise of an inclusive and equitable workforce—one where Deaf and disabled women and gender-diverse people can participate fully, safely, and with dignity.

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