Canadian Association for Supported Employment

CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH

Sparking Conversations

What Helps and Hinders Employment for Persons Experiencing Disability

Funded in part by the Government of Canada | Canada

About This Project

The Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE) partnered with the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR) on a qualitative study to better understand what helped and what hindered during the employment journey for persons experiencing disability. We wanted to learn more about people's lived experience through their own stories.

Fifteen job seekers and employees in Canada, each with unique experiences with disability and employment, shared what worked well and what made their employment journey harder. Representatives from two industry associations contributed employer perspectives around disability inclusion in the workplace.

Every person, every story matters.

Explore their stories. **Reflect** about disability and employment.
Talk about it with others.

Every time we reflect on disability and employment, it matters.

Every conversation we have matters.

National employment inclusion can happen, one person and one conversation at a time.

Audience for this kit

This kit was designed for anyone interested in learning more about disability and employment inclusion. It will also be of interest to employment service providers, employers, persons with lived experience, and community organizations.

Reflection and conversations

This kit includes a section for reflection and conversations. People can read participants' stories and explore the videos, then engage in personal reflection and conversations about disability and employment.

Project goal

Our goal with this project is to improve understanding of the diverse employment issues faced by job seekers and workers experiencing disability and how they could be resolved. We hope to spark conversations among individuals, employers, and organizations to encourage individual and collaborative actions. Together, we can strengthen disability inclusion in workplaces and employment systems locally, regionally, and nationally.

Ultimately, greater understanding and ongoing conversations can lead to more inclusive employment practices that support and normalize the hiring, retention, and advancement of persons who experience disability in Canada.

This project was funded in part by the Government of Canada's Accessible Canada Fund – National AccessAbility Week stream.

Funded in part by the Government of Canada | Canada

National AccessAbility Week

National AccessAbility Week (NAAW) takes place every year starting on the last Sunday in May to celebrate:

- the valuable contributions and leadership of persons with disabilities in Canada;
- the work of allies, organizations, and communities that are removing barriers; and
- ongoing efforts to become a more accessible and disability inclusive Canada.

Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE)

The Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE) is a national organization that collaborates with employment service providers, employers, community partners, and others across Canada toward employment inclusion of persons experiencing disability.

Employment inclusion means that all persons experiencing disability have equal opportunity to find, retain, and advance in meaningful, competitively paid employment.

Supported employment service providers offer many services, often at no charge, including:

1. Tailoring support for job seekers and workers to their specific skills, career goals, and needs.

2. Providing advice and resources to help employers meet their labour needs and build workplace inclusion.

Learn more about CASE by visiting supportedemployment.ca.

Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR)

The Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR) is committed to social justice and to building communities that are responsive and supportive, especially for people with limited access to power and opportunity.

They conduct and promote research that is community-driven, participatory, and action-oriented and that combines research with education and community involvement.

CCBR's work builds on community strengths to create awareness, policies, and practices that advance equitable participation and inclusion of all community members.

Learn more about CCBR at communitybasedresearch.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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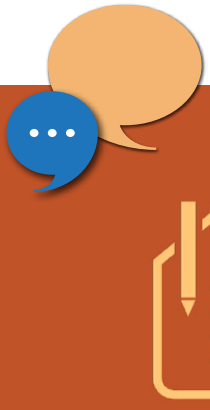

We'd love your feedback!

Please take 5 minutes to complete a short evaluation to let us know if you explored the stories, viewed the videos, reflected on your own, and/or had conversations with others about disability and employment. Thank you!

If you have any questions about this story kit, please email CASE at contact@supportedemployment.ca.

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How We Led the Study

Fifteen job seekers and employees in Canada who have various experiences with disability and employment were interviewed in 2025-2026. They were each asked:

1. about their overall employment journey
2. who or what made their journey easier
3. who or what made their journey harder
4. how to strengthen employment inclusion

All their stories are shared in this document either in writing or on video. You can access all the stories in the section, "Employment Journeys of Persons Experiencing Disability."

Two industry representatives, from ECO Canada and Tourism HR Canada, provided employer perspectives on workplace disability inclusion. They were both asked the same seven questions, which are listed with their responses in the section, "Employer Perspectives of Workplace Accessibility and Inclusion."

While this study has a small sample size, the results can inform reflection and conversations around the barriers and facilitators of employment in any workplace. Each of the participants contributed valuable information that can advance our understanding of disability and employment.

Key Themes

Ten key themes emerged during this study. The key themes are good starting points to increase understanding of the issues faced by persons experiencing disability as they navigate employment.

One larger theme that surfaced is that many of the barriers are not about physical environments. Rather, most barriers centre around people's attitudes, inflexible workplace policies and processes, or stigma about disability.

For example, the following barriers are highlighted in the themes:

- hiring based on traditional employment trajectories, which is harmful to the many job seekers with and without disability who have gaps or part-time work in their resume
- rigid employment policies, such as fixed hours
- a lack of disclosure or clear accommodation processes
- not believing or trusting employees about the disability or barriers

As we read through these themes, we can reflect on our own unconscious biases and we can work to reduce barriers in our practices and workplaces.

1. Employment is non-linear and characterized by repeated "starting over."

Across the dataset, employment trajectories were rarely stable or linear. Participants described cycles of education, employment, illness, recovery, retraining, migration, and job loss. These disruptions were not due to lack of motivation or ability but to health events, systemic inflexibility, and life circumstances.

"I have cerebral palsy, which affects my ability to move. So I have limited mobility... [back in my home country] I was declined in my tenure track to be a university Prof. I was for years... they just simply denied it based on my physical disability, which didn't have anything to do with my teaching... then I decided to move to Canada, and I worked at the McGill University as a visiting scholar and research assistant. But then when I wanted to come to the job market, and not non-academic job market, it was a very long journey... just for a nutshell, within the past five years, I applied for 700 jobs to get three jobs, basically, which is way too higher than it should be." (Zaal)

This pattern challenges dominant employment models that assume uninterrupted full-time participation and penalize gaps or career shifts.

2. Disability is often manageable; systems are not.

Participants consistently reported that their disabilities could be accommodated, but rigid employment systems made participation difficult or impossible. Fixed schedules, inflexible job design, mandatory physical presence, and narrow productivity norms were cited as major barriers.

"If you don't fit the normal, healthy nine-to-five scenario, there are a lot of barriers." (Rina)

This finding indicates that exclusion is often produced by organizational design choices, not by disability itself.

3. Inclusion depends on individuals rather than institutions (over-reliance on goodwill rather than rights).

Positive employment experiences frequently hinged on the actions of a single supportive person, such as a manager, employer, or job developer, rather than on formal policies or organizational structures.

"They were very welcoming, and said, no problem, we will support you and welcome (you) here. And they hired me on the spot." (Seamus)

While these moments were transformative, they were also fragile, temporary, and unevenly distributed. Inclusion was often experienced as conditional rather than guaranteed.

4. Non-apparent disabilities create a constant disclosure dilemma.

Participants, specifically those experiencing non-apparent disabilities, described ongoing uncertainty around disclosure. Disclosure decisions were shaped by fear of bias, lack of safe spaces, and unclear benefits.

"There's a spot where you can tick if you have a disability… I'm not sure if it helps or makes things harder. Sometimes I worry that ticking the box might lead to bias." (Bart)

The absence of trust-based disclosure processes increases emotional labour and limits opportunities for meaningful accommodation.

5. Digitalization has created a new accessibility divide.

Digital hiring systems, online interviews, and algorithm-driven platforms were identified as both enabling and exclusionary. While remote work benefited some participants, others struggled with virtual interviews, digital-only communication, or inaccessible platforms.

"There have been times when the video or audio didn't work right, I didn't know how to fix it, and it made me really anxious because I wanted to make a good impression." (Bart)

The core issue was not technology itself, but the removal of choice and lack of human flexibility.

6. Recognition, trust, and dignity are central to employment success.

Participants emphasized that being believed, respected, and recognized as capable mattered as much as formal accommodations. When employers trusted lived experience, participants felt safer and more productive.

"Just trust people when they tell you that there's something that … is a barrier to them, whether you can see it or not… believe them, and take into account the lived experiences of people who have different needs than you." (Alice)

This highlights the relational dimension of inclusion, often overlooked in compliance-focused approaches.

7. Flexibility unlocks capability rather than lowering standards.

Flexible hours, task modification, remote or hybrid work, and pacing allowed participants to perform effectively without reducing expectations or quality of work.

"As soon as I have that chair and can sit down, I can focus and do my job well." (Jennifer)

Flexibility functioned as an enabler of productivity, not a concession.

8. Being judged before being recognized limits opportunity.

Many participants described being screened out before having the chance to demonstrate competence. Assumptions about disability often replaced evidence of ability.

"It's able-bodied people checking on us: what can't we do, rather than what we can do!" (Zaal)

This theme underscores how hiring processes reinforce stereotypes rather than assess real capacity.

9. Structural supports and intermediaries change outcomes.

When participants accessed employment intermediaries, advocates, or structured supports, their employment trajectories shifted significantly from isolation and confusion to clarity and opportunity.

"If I had known about them [a supporting organization] a year ago, it might have been a whole lot different." (Jennifer)

However, access to such supports was inconsistent and often discovered by chance.

10. Tokenistic inclusion versus meaningful power-sharing.

Participants differentiated between symbolic inclusion and real systemic change. Diversity statements without lived-experience leadership were widely viewed as ineffective.

"Nothing about us without us." (Zaal)

Meaningful inclusion was associated with decision-making power, co-design, and accountability.

Participant-Informed Opportunities for Improvement

In addition to the key themes above, we also present participant-informed suggestions that offer clear, practical insights into how employment systems could work better. Drawing directly from lived experience, these suggestions highlight opportunities for change at the organizational, policy, and cultural levels.

Rather than focusing on individual accommodation alone, participants emphasized system-level adjustments that could improve access, stability, and inclusion for both job seekers and employers across the employment journey.

Normalize flexibility in work design:

Participants emphasized that work should be designed to accommodate human variability rather than rigid schedules. Flexible hours, reduced workloads, part-time roles, and hybrid or remote options allowed people to manage health, pain, fatigue, and caregiving responsibilities without sacrificing productivity.

Create safer and clearer disclosure processes:

Participants highlighted the need for disclosure processes that do not penalize job seekers. Many felt pressured to disclose too early or avoid disclosure altogether due to fear of bias. Participants suggested that disclosure should be optional, supported, and framed around access needs.

Improve hiring and interview practices:

Participants called for hiring processes that are clear, consistent, and accessible. Conflicting instructions, unclear expectations, and rushed interviews created unnecessary stress, particularly for neurodivergent candidates and those with anxiety.

Redesign job requirements and credentials:

Many participants experienced exclusion due to credentials, certifications, or driver's license requirements that were not essential to the job. They emphasized the importance of valuing transferable skills, lived experience, and demonstrated ability over formal qualifications alone. Trial periods or probationary roles were suggested as ways to allow candidates to show competence rather than being screened out prematurely.

Strengthen workplace communication and trust:

Participants stressed that inclusion depends on ongoing communication rather than one-time accommodations. Regular check-ins, open dialogue, and being believed when describing barriers created a sense of safety and stability. Also, trust was described as foundational to successful accommodation.

Address accessibility beyond physical entry:

Participants noted that accessibility extends beyond getting into a building. Daily needs such as washroom access, food preparation, personal care, and the timing of caregiver support significantly affected their ability to work. Transportation and commute burden were also major barriers, particularly in smaller provinces. Proactive planning for these everyday realities made work more sustainable.

Expand the role of employment intermediaries and job developers:

Participants who worked with employment intermediaries described significantly improved outcomes. Job developers helped match candidates with inclusive employers, prepared workplaces in advance, and reduced misunderstanding on both sides. Participants recommended expanding funding and awareness of these services and creating networks of employers committed to inclusive hiring.

Provide mental health and trauma-informed supports:

Participants emphasized that mental health and trauma shape how people experience work. Regular check-ins, access to counselling, and trauma-informed management practices helped reduce anxiety and burnout. Recognizing emotional labour and isolation as part of the work experience was seen as essential, not optional.

Improve income and benefit systems:

Participants described income and benefit systems as misaligned with part-time, episodic, or fluctuating work capacity. Participants suggested reducing penalties and designing supports that encourage gradual and flexible participation in the workforce.

Move from tokenistic to meaningful inclusion:

Participants distinguished between symbolic inclusion and real change. Equity statements and mandatory training were seen as insufficient without lived-experience leadership and accountability. Participants emphasized the importance of co-designing policies, practices, and training with people who experience disability and ensuring they hold real decision-making power.

Employment Journeys of Persons Experiencing Disability

No one's employment story is the same. No one's experience of disability is the same. This section contains the employment stories of 15 people who experience disability.

You can also explore the two accompanying videos that highlight four of the stories:

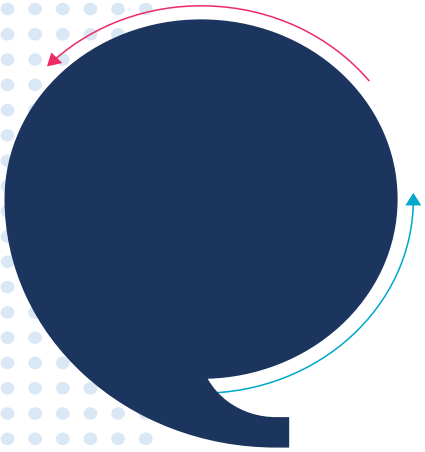
Video 1 focuses on the challenges.

Video 2 focuses on participant recommendations.

Each story is vastly different.

Each person experiences a different form of disability. Each person has faced different employment barriers. Each person has experienced different kinds of help along the way. And each person has suggestions on how we can improve employment systems to make them inclusive of all people.

If we take away one learning from this study, let it be the importance of assessing ability and what people can do — rather than assuming what they can't do.



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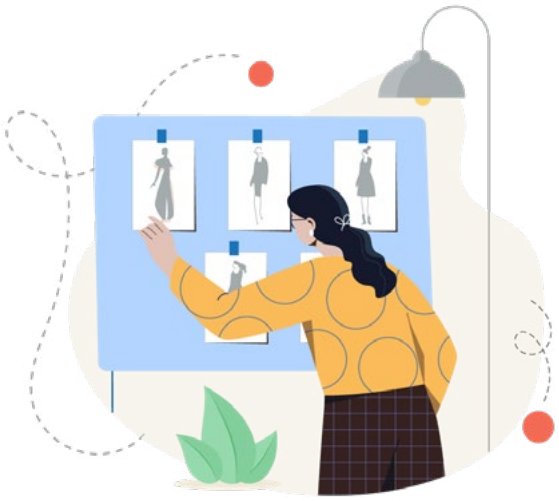
Navigating Anxiety and Art in a New Home



Designing the future

Masy is a young woman from Iran who moved to Canada in 2022. She now lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She works full-time as a fashion designer at a small studio, which is also her home. The studio is owned by a mother whose daughter has Down syndrome.

Masy believes having a child with Down syndrome helps her employer understand and support people with different needs. As she explained, "She [employer] is kind of trained herself by her daughter… the fact that she's [employer] having her daughter with Down syndrome, might have influenced how she works and that helps me."

Before moving to Canada, Masy studied software engineering in Iran, but after attending a fashion event, she found her true passion. She says: "I said, okay, that's the thing that I love. So I have to do this for the rest of my life."

She went on to study fashion in Istanbul, Turkiye, and later moved to Halifax to attend the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). While studying, she worked part-time at retail stores, Levi's and Simons, as a stylist and assistant manager.

Masy lives with anxiety, a disability experience she described as both a strength and a challenge. She says: "Two things about me that made me possible to get this job… my anxiety, and the other one… my perfectionism." These experiences can be hard to manage, but they also push her to do her best at work.

She always has my back!

One of the main reasons Masy enjoys her job as a fashion designer with the studio is the strong support she gets from her employer. In her words: "She [employer] doesn't matter what is it, but she supports me." For example, her employer helped her manage her anxiety and perfectionism: "She [Employer] always says, please share things that bother you. I can help you… I can always count on her."

When Masy worries about making mistakes, her employer reassures her by providing positive feedback: "She [Employer] always says that I'm so good at my job… there's no need to be worried." This trust made Masy feel safer and more confident at work.

In another example, Masy asked if the studio—where she also lives—could replace an old, noisy sewing machine that triggered her anxiety. Though the new machine was an expense, her boss bought it. Masy says: "It changed the way that I make the clothes… it was really good for my anxiety." These actions show how small changes can make a big difference in mental health and job performance.

Some things are still hard

Even though Masy works in a supportive place, she still faces challenges. Finding a job in fashion in Halifax was hard. Even after getting hired, working alone at the studio was emotionally tough for her.

With no close family or friends nearby, the loneliness was difficult. She shares some distressing events from her home country and says, "I had a panic attack here… because of the situation in Iran and no one was here to help me."

Language is also a challenge. English is not her first language, so communication can sometimes feel overwhelming: "Sometimes my employer asks me something, and I have to think or read her message like multiple times to understand." This can make things slower and more stressful.

Also, because her employer has a different professional background, some technical parts of fashion design can be more challenging to navigate. Masy explained that "sometimes we don't understand each other in this field." They both try to communicate and work together, but sometimes misunderstandings happen, which can add stress at work.

Mental health and meaningful recognition at work

Masy has ideas about how workplaces can better support people with disabilities like hers. She thinks regular mental health support would really help: "I would love to talk with a consultant or shrink every month. …that would be beneficial."

She also thinks that when employers hire for jobs outside their own experience, they should take time to learn about the nature of the work. This can help everyone work better together and avoid misunderstandings, especially in technical or creative jobs.

What matters most to Masy is kindness and being recognized. "If they say, 'Oh, that's perfect, that's the thing that we were expecting you to do,' it makes me happy." Encouragement and positive feedback help her feel more confident. "Talking about how good I am… it makes me happy."

Masy's story shows that employers' small, thoughtful actions—like listening, providing the right tools, or giving kind words—can make a big difference in someone's work experience.

With the Right Support, I Can Succeed

Hope and uncertainty

Bart (not his real name) is a young man who loves learning and solving problems, which led him to study Computer Science and Physics. Bart worked hard in school, but starting his career brought new challenges.

"I was formally diagnosed with ADHD tendencies and at the same time as autism at about nine" Bart shares, and continues: "I started taking medication for it, but then, due to kind of pressures at home, I [did not take] them anymore."

Later, while at university and working, Bart noticed something was wrong. He says, "I couldn't focus and I couldn't get the work done." He decided to take the medication again, even though it was uncomfortable for him.

Now, as a recent graduate, Bart is looking for jobs in digital security and defence. He hopes to find a job that matches his skills and interests. He calls this a "transitory period" filled with hope and uncertainty.

"I've sent out over 60 to 70 resumes so far over a period of 3–4 months," he says. "It can be overwhelming. Sometimes I feel like I'm doing everything right, and other times I don't know if I'm on the right path." Bart also performs in circus shows as a passion, which helps him manage job search stress.

Supportive moments

Even though the job search has been hard, Bart has had some encouraging moments. One example was during an interview with an IT company. "When I had to do a test as part of the interview, they told me I could take extra time, no problem," he recalls. That understanding helped ease his anxiety and made him feel noticed.

Bart believes that training employers to understand disability accommodations is essential for improving accessibility. "It's not about giving special treatment—it's about adapting processes thoughtfully, so everyone has a fair chance."

To him, accessibility extends beyond physical ramps or specialized software. He says the main issue is not that people don't want to change, but that many people don't really understand autism, which leads to wrong assumptions and poor decisions. "For example, giving clear written instructions instead of long verbal ones or allowing breaks during long interviews."

He adds, "I find that when instructions are straightforward and literal, I can do much better. When things are vague or inconsistent, it's confusing and stressful."

"It's about being understood and accepted."

Even with some positive moments, Bart still faces big challenges in his job search. One main problem is inconsistent communication from employers. "Sometimes one manager tells me to send my resume a certain way, and then someone else says something different," Bart says, and continues, "I like clear and consistent instructions, so this back and forth is really challenging."

Another stressful part is the disability disclosure section on job applications. "There's a spot where you can tick if you have a disability," he explains. "I'm not sure if it helps or makes things harder. Sometimes I worry that ticking the box might lead to bias."

Virtual interviews, which are now common, are also hard for Bart. Technical problems, like audio or video glitches, make him anxious. Bart explains, "There have been times when the video or audio didn't work right, I didn't know how to fix it, and it made me really anxious because I wanted to make a good impression."

Bart also finds the emotional side of job searching with a disability very hard. He says, "It's not just about skills, it's about being understood and accepted. Sometimes I feel like I have to prove myself twice as much."

Beyond the resume

Based on his experience, Bart has ideas for making hiring better for persons experiencing disability. He thinks accommodations should be normal and offered without judgment. "I think breaks should be allowed without a big fuss," he says. "It helps me reset my focus without feeling like I'm being judged or different."

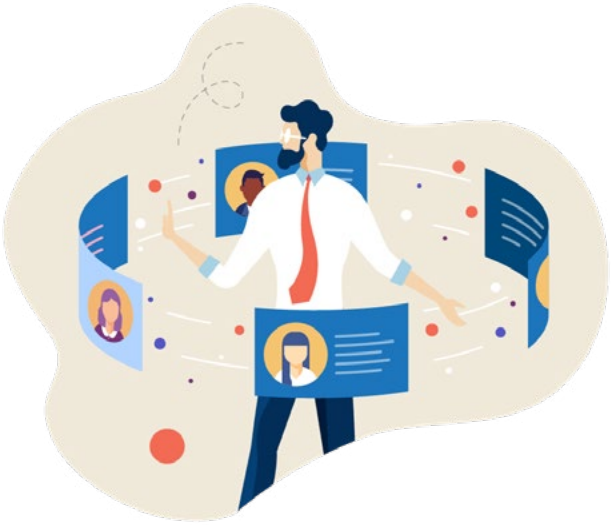
He also says companies should be consistent. "If every company had similar steps, it would be easier for people like me to prepare and understand what to expect," he explains. "Right now, every company does things differently, which adds confusion and stress."

Bart says clear and patient communication is important. "If employers are patient and straightforward, it makes a huge difference. Sometimes simple things like giving written instructions or asking if I need more time help me a lot."

Finally, Bart wants employers to look beyond the resume. He says:

"I want employers to see who I am, not just what's on paper... Sometimes I get nervous or need extra time, but that doesn't mean I can't do the job well... Everyone deserves a chance to show what they can do... with the right support, I know I can succeed. It's just about finding the right place that gets that."

More Than You Notice: A Story of Challenge and Change



Overcoming loss and building a life through education

Seamus (not his real name) is 57 years old and has faced major loss and change in his life. He was born into a biracial family, with a Bangladeshi Muslim father and an Irish Catholic mother who had experienced trauma as a child.

His early years were marked by instability and grief. Seamus's mother struggled with alcoholism and mental illness, and she died by suicide when he was just 13. "That was a fundamental point for me," he said, reflecting on how that trauma affected him over time.

Seamus was a gifted student, but he left high school early and spent his young adult years learning music. During this time, he lived with undiagnosed ADHD and severe anxiety, which were not diagnosed until he was 28.

Later, he returned to school and earned a Bachelor of Arts in Music from Dalhousie University. He also completed a Bachelor of Education at Acadia University and became a certified teacher, including certification to teach English as a Second Language (ESL).

A chance to teach, a space to grow

Seamus now teaches two ESL classes with help from a non-profit employment agency that helps persons who experience disability find work. He says the agency has been key to getting teaching opportunities.

His caseworker told him he was qualified to teach ESL and that a job was available. He explains: "I went for an interview, and I found it very terrifying and difficult just because of the anxiety, but the response that I got was really lovely.

Seamus recalls, "I said, I'm going to give this a go, but I'm going to let you know that I am a bag of nerves, and I have this extreme anxiety thing. So they were very welcoming, and said, no problem, we will support you and welcome (you) here. And they hired me on the spot. It was fantastic!"

His workplace gave him a laptop and a tech support person who helps him with computer tasks, which he finds hard. Positive feedback from his supervisor has also built his confidence. "You realize that we have a waiting list… to get into your class," his supervisor told him, highlighting the difference he's making. While these are

good experiences, Seamus only receives a small honorarium for teaching and is still looking for other work to cover his expenses.

When the system falls short

While Seamus enjoys teaching, working at a nonprofit hasn't always been easy. He's grateful for his supervisor's support, but says the organization often feels chaotic and disorganized.

"For instance, I have an anxiety disorder, so it's very important for me to know what I'm walking into and to have expectations that I can count on… I have a lesson prepared… and I need a TV screen for it, and they just kicked me out of the room with no thought, no warning whatsoever."

Seamus says these issues aren't about personal failure but about bigger problems, like lack of structure, poor communication, and overworked staff. He says, "No matter how much training you have, if a person is under pressure or has a certain mindset that they want to do what they're going to do, nothing's going to get in their way." One example was when he wasn't paid for a month.

"I was like, what? What's going on? And [the finance controller] was like, oh, sorry, get you next month. I was like, No!... I need this money… It was so… shocking to me. But the thing is, if [they] had support, somebody else would have taken care of the payroll."

Seamus thinks better funding and stronger staffing could prevent many of these problems. He believes nonprofits should have dedicated HR staff and more support for workers experiencing disability and the teams who work with them.

Noticing the invisible

Seamus knows that invisible disabilities, like anxiety, are often misunderstood or ignored.

He explains, "I think the physical ones are a little bit easier, like if you're in a wheelchair, you need a ramp. If you have anxiety or you have some sort of emotional or mental kind of disability, those are tricky. You can't see them. So I think training with regard to what those specific things are is most helpful, because then you can understand the responses that you get from the person."

He believes it is essential to educate employers and coworkers about mental health. Seamus's story shows the life-changing impact of supportive workplaces and the ongoing need for more inclusive, flexible, and understanding systems, especially for people living with mental health challenges who want a chance to succeed.

A Desire to Give, a Need to Be Noticed

A longing to contribute

Rina (not her real name) is a 58-year-old woman who has lived with chronic fatigue syndrome for the past 36 years. Her illness started when she was just 22 and in university. Although she was able to complete her second year, her health made it impossible for her to continue her studies or build a steady career.

Over the years, Rina has looked for ways to stay involved in meaningful work, such as writing, acting, research, and creative projects. However, the ups and downs of her health have made regular employment extremely difficult.

She says, "The majority of my life, I haven't been able to work. I've been too sick to work. So [I] have lived off social assistance for much of that time." Despite everything, Rina's desire to contribute to society has remained strong: "I have longed, like desperately longed, to do some sort of work, both financially… but also, I mean, you find a lot of meaning and purpose through being able to contribute to society."

Support that fits the person

Rina did not find work through job postings or employment programs, and instead, it came through her personal network.

For 17 years, a friend helped her get short-term contracts in writing and research. These jobs were flexible and built around her energy levels.

There was no pressure to work on a fixed schedule. She explains: "I was… hired… with them fully understanding that I have these limitations… [and] specific needs around being able to work at my pace… Most employers aren't going to be that generous."

Rina believes that positive work experiences help people feel like they are contributing to society, and even small or repetitive tasks can feel meaningful when they offer a sense of purpose. As she emphasizes, "Even when it is mind-numbingly boring… [such as] just transcribing... not the most exciting work in the world… But it still felt so satisfying."

She also found encouragement through a non-profit employment agency that supports people with disabilities. They helped her get funding to take a short study program and gain new skills. This gave her a small but important sense of possibility: "That part was really good… gives a little bit of hope that maybe there's a possibility of something."

When the system doesn't fit

Even though Rina has talent and a strong track record in contract work, she still struggles to find jobs that match her changing health and energy levels. Because of chronic fatigue, how she feels can shift from hour to hour.

"It's really almost impossible to commit to very specific hours [9 to 5 work hours]," she mentioned. Rina explains that there are no structures in place for people like her to find suitable jobs, such as part-time or flexible hours.

Not having formal degrees is another challenge for Rina: "I don't have any degrees… so that also is a barrier." When she tried to apply for training programs to build new skills, she ran into requirements that she couldn't meet, such as needing to have worked full-time or for a certain number of hours in the past. "There are a lot of barriers… if you don't fit the normal, healthy nine-to-five scenario," she said.

Things became even harder after her mother passed away. Rina inherited a house, which meant she lost her housing subsidy and income assistance. Suddenly, she was in a financial crisis. "So suddenly, major panic, right? Major panic."

A call for compassion and change

Rina's story highlights the need for major changes in how we approach work and disability. She believes people like her, who are capable but living with unpredictable health, need job services designed for their reality: "If a database could be created, where… companies that need things like transcription… that's just a perfect job for people in my kind of situation."

She proposes a government-supported initiative to build such a job database and connect with employers open to inclusive hiring. Living with chronic illness has made her feel invisible, and she wants systems that recognize and include people like her.

Rina also suggests "to have facilitation in the beginning where both new employer and employee are given communication tools and encouraged to create a bubble of safety for open ongoing dialogue about needs and expectations." She explains: "When you're coming into a situation with more challenges than the average person, there is additional stress… and fear of bringing up any struggles."

For Rina, compassion is key. She wonders if there could "be some sort of script, or something handed to employers to give [employers] some sort of sense [of] what another human being's life actually looks like [which is] different from theirs." To her, it's not about lowering expectations, it's about doing things differently, with dignity and understanding.

Contributing in My Own Way

Big dreams; need for flexibility

Steven is a young man born and raised in Grande Prairie, Alberta. He graduated from Peace Wapiti with a high school diploma and has been trying to find a job since. Over the years, he has gained experience working or volunteering part-time in different places, such as the Special Olympics, the Summer Games, and at a campground, earning a reputation for "five-star" service.

Steven has always loved vehicles. He dreams of working for companies such as Volkswagen or John Deere. He says, "I'm a really good salesperson… I can sell a vehicle... or a tractor… I'm also good at cleaning… clean vehicles or…inside… the shop." He identifies himself as reliable and good with technology and hands-on work.

Steven lives with autism (XYY syndrome), which he describes as: "I'm not good at like, math or science, but I can actually [be] very smart in technology… smart in one way, but... not smart other way." He can speak clearly, work, and contribute — just in different ways.

He is looking for part-time work with short shifts. "I get bored easily, and I just want to work like two, three hours [per shift] only… and six to eight hours per week." It is hard to find jobs like this, especially when they need long shifts, a driver's license, or don't allow support workers to be on site.

Proving ability

Steven often feels misunderstood because of his disability. He says, "It's hard to talk about my disability to people... They think that people with disability are not likely to work and more likely to be lazy or taking days off." He believes people who experience disability can do the job, but others don't always realize that: "we… [are] able to do [the job] right, but they think that our disability can... ruin their careers and... their lives."

Steven has had positive job experiences that remind him of his value. He describes a good job as "Happiness. Just happiness from straight-up… I really love[d] working here [in campground] and I have a fun time." He enjoys connecting with coworkers: "We talk, we chat… at lunchtime... it makes me excitement and happiness and enjoying what I do at this job."

Support from coworkers and managers made a big difference. Steven remembers, "They gave me high fives and fist bumps

and tell me I have [a] good day… and give me this symbol." He raises his hands and moves them and continues: "It's called 'hang loose.' This means keep having good day and... a great time here."

People complimented his work, writing, "This person was [a] good cleaner. He is really nice… Every time I talk to him, he gives me a good time." He also likes getting positive feedback from employers when he applies for jobs.

Steven's journey hasn't been easy, but he keeps showing up with a positive attitude, ready to work and hoping for more opportunities where people realize what he can do and not just notice his disability.

Just give me a chance!

Steven has worked hard to find jobs he enjoys, but he has faced unfair treatment and barriers because of his disability. "Yes, all the time," he says when asked if his potential has ever been overlooked. He explains that people judge him before giving him a chance. "They think their business will not allow someone with a disability in their workplace… because they think we're going to do a terrible job."

Steven sees problems with the system and hiring rules, like jobs needing special training or certificates. "It's hard for someone like me… because they need a special certificate or diploma to get these jobs."

Another barrier is the requirement to have a driver's license. "They need a straight up class 1, class 2, class 3, class 5... driver's license." He suspects some employers use this as an excuse to avoid hiring people like him. Steven wants employers to know he can do the job and just needs a chance to prove it.

Notice the strengths, support the growth

Steven's message to employers is that people who experience disability can do a great job. He wants employers to focus on the strengths of the applicants. When asked what could help, Steven emphasized better training and more understanding: "Have the right knowledge... for the people who are… like me."

To the government, Steven is clear: "We need better inclusion and better community for people [like] us to get jobs." He wants more job programs and skills training so people who experience disability have a real chance at the jobs they want.

Steven's wish is to be noticed, supported, and given a fair chance.

From Disempowerment to Empowerment: Navigating Academia and Industry with a Disability

Landing the job before finishing school

Niki (not her real name) is a 32-year-old engineer who moved from Iran to Canada in 2019. She was born missing her right forearm, but this didn't stop her from following her dreams. Niki earned her bachelor and master's in chemical engineering in Iran and completed her PhD in Montreal.

While studying, she worked as a model with a disability, but when talking about starting her professional career, Niki says, "I'm actually very lucky. I think I'm in like a different story… from others… I kinda got my job before I finish my education."

During her PhD, Niki presented at a conference and won an award for best graduate studies presentation. This recognition led her to connect with the CEO of her current employer, who told her, "Whenever you finish your education, contact me — I might have something for you."

After completing her PhD, Niki reached out, was interviewed, and got her job in Vancouver without applying elsewhere. In her current job, Niki focuses on research and solving industrial problems, relying on her intellectual skills rather than physical

labour. She reflected, "I'm not primarily working with... machines and stuff. There is always someone else can do that... my job is more intellectual."

Respect, support, and a great start

About her hiring process, Niki said it was supportive and respectful. She remembers the job interview as a positive experience:

"It was... a round of questions from everyone… my immediate current boss is very understanding, and... he led the interview, so it was very common, friendly… if it was some point that they found that I cannot answer like further they stopped, and they didn't really… persist to go more into something that I clearly didn't know."

She appreciated that her employer let her travel to Iran before starting her job, saying, "They gave me time to leave Montreal, go back to Iran, see my family, and come here. That was very helpful." At work, the Human Resources (HR) department has also been considerate of Niki's situation and asked if she needed any specific accommodations:

"HR... asked me if I need anything special at the very beginning… I could ask for a specific keyboard or mouse or like whatever. But I'm used to the normal version of this stuff. So I didn't ask, but they asked me if I need anything."

Niki also benefits from supportive coworkers and technicians who help with physical tasks. "Here we have technicians. They help, so I don't have to do it myself. It's all positive." Niki also praised her supervisor and the workplace culture: "Each time I want to take time off, he is being very kind. There is a culture of understanding here, and it makes a big difference." These experiences made Niki feel included, capable, and supported, allowing her to focus on her work.

When help hurts!

Despite these positive experiences in her current workplace, Niki faced significant challenges during her PhD program. She recalled that offers of help from her supervisor often felt disempowering: "I felt each time he was offering the help was like diminishing… I didn't like it. So, at some point, I stopped asking actively for help."

She also had to do physically demanding tasks that were not suited to her abilities and faced demeaning comments from her supervisor: "He kind of was dehumanizing, like saying bad stuff, saying that… you are not smart enough, or you can't do this, or you should go back to your own country. I don't know why I hired you."

Niki refers to the fatigue that comes with working as a person with a disability and continues: "I would say… a lot of people with disabilities should work less. But I don't ask that because I don't feel it's really acceptable or it's like right, reasonable to others."

Opening doors

Niki highlighted practical steps to make workplaces more accessible and inclusive. She suggested companies reserve a small portion of their available positions specifically for people with disabilities, stating, "Let's say if it's a law that… every company, should have, like, 2% [of their employees from] people with disability… that gives people with disability hope that they will find [a] job."

She also advocated for fewer work hours for employees with disabilities who request that option, supported by government measures.

Niki stressed that employers need education about job demands and disability inclusion: "They should understand what the job requires and how to support people effectively, not just assume we can manage everything on our own." Her insights highlight how policy, awareness, and practical support are critical for creating fair and inclusive workplaces where employees experiencing disability can thrive.

Nothing About Us Without Us

Denied, yet determined

Zaal (not his real name) is an accomplished scholar and accessibility professional who has lived in Canada since 2016. Born with cerebral palsy, which limits his mobility, Zaal uses various assistive devices such as wheelchairs, scooters, and crutches. Originally from Iran, Zaal holds a PhD in Persian Literature. He has built a broad skill set through certifications in communication, editorial work, project management, and accessibility.

Zaal moved to Canada after being denied a university faculty position due to his disability. He worked as a visiting scholar and research assistant at McGill University, then shifted his focus to accessibility during the pandemic. He is now a leading voice in accessibility forums.

Zaal's employment journey has been challenging. He has applied for over 700 jobs in five years, securing only three positions across Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia. Each province shaped his experience differently.

The many faces of barriers

Early in his job search, Zaal learned difficult lessons about disclosing his disability. A peer advised him not to disclose, but he chose to be transparent. "I did not listen, and I learned the hard way," he says. Of his first 100 serious job searches, he believes "more than half… were retracted offers" after employers learned about his disability.

He believes many rejections were due to unnecessary driving requirements — an extra barrier for some people experiencing disability. For example, a government job application was auto-rejected when he answered "No" to questions about owning a car and having a license. He escalated the issue through several layers of bureaucracy for reconsideration. He says with surprise, "It's a disability-focused job. You can't hinder people… because you don't know how they will come to the job."

Zaal also found that many employers neglect basic inclusion practices, especially during online recruitment. "Every organization puts that equity statement… but they don't even know what that means." He notes that simple actions like enabling captions or flexible interview times are rarely offered, though "lots of people will benefit from those simple reminders."

Zaal has faced bias in many forms, especially when his disability or accent is noticed. "One of the senior leaders was shocked that I have a scooter," he shares, highlighting that many people do not know how to react to a person who experiences disability. He has also been told, "Your accent is not neutral… your wording is not neutral," which adds another layer of burden and stress on him.

People seeking work in the accessibility sector encounter barriers, even when using online professional and employment platforms. Zaal says platforms like LinkedIn don't make accessibility or disabilities related jobs easy to find, making job searches harder for him. "Your job search is way harder than others," he explains, "because the algorithm isn't built for us."

Zaal also points out that the post-COVID push to return to in-person work ignores the hard-won flexibility long advocated by people who experience disability.

"Now that they [able-bodied people] can go out, they are bringing back everything to in-person… without asking us… without having a mechanism [to ask], 'Do you need to have one or two days at home because you have different needs? You need to go to physiotherapy, you take five more times than I to come to work because you use a different transport?' None of that is happening. So, we are forgetting our lessons from pre-COVID."

Highlighting that employers with lived experience have a better understanding of the issues, Zaal shares that his first job came from an entrepreneur who experiences disability. "If it was not a person with disability, [I don't think] I would have had the early chance to enter the field." For Zaal, that shows a lot about how the system works. "It's able-bodied people checking on us — what can't we do — rather than what can we do."

Tokenistic inclusion is another concern for Zaal: "As long as you don't make your decision-makers really diversified, [real change will not happen]."

Support: individual to institutional

While many of Zaal's experiences have been discouraging, some have given him hope. He says:

"It is not like everyone is ignorant…. there are organizations that advocate for equitable hiring and helping persons with disabilities, helping employers to employ them, specifically the Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW) and Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB)… those organizations are doing a very extensive awareness campaign and whatever they can to change this, and we see some small changes."

In one case, two managers challenged their HR department to bring back Zaal's retracted application. They conducted the interview themselves to ensure an accurate process based on Zaal's condition. "That shows that people in power, when they are prone to learn from persons with disabilities, they can go out of their boxes to do positive things."

In his current role, the management team developed an inclusive onboarding process and regularly checks in on him. He highlights, "If there is a team that cares, they check on a regular basis… they are very open to hear the challenges and work through them."

Zaal also notes that awareness about inclusion is increasing, which is a positive sign for him. Additionally, he believes that the legislative frameworks, such as the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), have provided tools that some employers use to enhance workplace conditions.

Inclusive employment: from awareness to action

Drawing on his experience across provinces and sectors, Zaal offers ideas to improve employment for persons who experience disability. He suggests anonymous, unified application systems to reduce bias: "Make everything unified and even without name… eliminate bias." He also calls for greater transparency in job descriptions, including salary ranges, and criticizes delays in adopting such policies.

Zaal identifies gaps in how employers are trained. He says compliance-based training like the AODA is not enough. "You want to know what it looks like [for me] to get to my job and why I'm paid for seven hours, but my day is 12 hours?... That's about exposure. We lack that."

He proposes involving people with lived experience in designing the training programs, paired with real-world interaction — preferably in workplaces. "Knowledge is not coming from pure information. It's coming from [meaningful] exposure."

Zaal emphasizes that people from groups that need more support should be the ones leading change as real decision-makers, not just symbolic figures. He says, "decision-makers are nowhere near… 'nothing about us without us.'"

He also recommends creating a public database of workplace accommodations and legal cases to prevent repeating past mistakes and to be more accountable. He believes some accommodation policies exist, but many are outdated or inaccessible.

The lack of access to current information forces people to "redo all of this fight everywhere we go, and restart from the scratch, which is very daunting, literally." He says that a centralized system would help employers learn from past cases, adopt proven solutions, and reduce barriers.

Ultimately, Zaal believes every employer can make a difference: "Every single person can make a change... It is not coming from outside. Every single person that their mindset can be changed will make a big impact."

You Can't Judge a Book by Its Cover

Roots and resilience

Monish is a biomedical engineer from Mumbai, India. He grew up in a family that valued education — his father was a teacher and his brother is a computer engineer. Monish worked for over 12 years in medical devices in India.

He says, "My education is in biomedical engineer. So, I adhered myself to a lot of high-end medical machines." His work included fixing and servicing medical equipment (cranium and oral maxillofacial implants, baby incubators, CT scans, and MRIs) and working in sales and compliance.

In 2009, while in college, Monish suffered a serious hip injury in an accident. He explains, "It took me really nine different surgeries to fix my acetabular joint… before coming to Canada, it was like eighth surgery… Now I can walk like a normal person on two legs." Despite these challenges, he finished his education and kept working.

In 2022, he moved to Canada, hoping to find work in his field. But he discovered that "somehow the physical attributes don't align with the employers' expectations." To pay his bills, he took jobs at gas stations, grocery stores, and fast-food restaurants.

He reflects on these kinds of occupations: "[General] jobs are like working at a grocery store, working at a gas station and working at any fast-food joint… it's okay for survival, but in the long term, a professional, I guess I mean, educated person like us cannot see his future slowly depend upon this kind of jobs."

Moments of light

Even with these challenges, Monish had moments of empathy and support, which he refers to as "human virtue." Some employers respected his qualifications and responded positively when he asked for some adjustments to accommodate his needs.

He explains, "I did have some positive experiences in the job search, where the employers were… so considerate that when I told them about some minimal adjustments that I need, they were so responsive to it that I felt very, you know, valued and respected."

One hiring manager moved an interview to a more accessible place. "It was like two flight climb to the interview room…

when the hiring manager knew… he shifted whole scenery of the interview at the ground level itself."

Experiences like this reinforced Monish's belief that "the more important thing for the employer should be my skills, my qualifications and… the ability to perform the work that he has given to me, and not… my physical attributes."

Shadows in the search

Monish's job search in Canada was often affected by discrimination and problems in the system. He wasn't sure how much to share about his disability. "I was always unsure how much to disclose about my surgery… mentioning it might always influence the employer's [assumption] of my ability to do the work."

He shared a difficult experience at a gas station: "The employer left [to go] home. He gave me a big rack of coolers… it was like four hours of bending… I couldn't finish the work in whole eight hours." He lost that job after only 15 days.

In another case, he interviewed for a quality assurance job at the same time as another candidate. Monish says, "Even though his assessment score was less than [mine]… he got the job. So, this is what clearly says that [physical condition] does matter to the employers."

He also pointed out that "mandatory on-site attendance even when remote work is possible" was a barrier: "I remember one [case, where] work from home [was] available, they… asked me to come on site."

In addition, many interview locations were not accessible for Monish: "Attending personal interviews at the locations which had non-accessible entrance… elevator… or appropriate sitting… was most physically challenging and disheartening for me."

A vision for change

Monish believes workplaces should be easier to access, staff should receive awareness and sensitivity training to better understand disability, and flexible work should be offered. He says that "including remote or hybrid options and ergonomically preferred workstations would help employees maintain productivity and unnecessary strain."

He also believes "there should be a positive mindset from the person who hires that everyone on the... humanitarian grounds should be judged equally." He calls on them to consider the potential of job seekers rather than their limitations. He also suggested the government should give employers incentives to hire people who experience disability.

Monish remains hopeful and determined, and his message to the employers is, "I'll say, just hire me at least... let me give three months of provision. If you like my work... I'll be a good employee."

There's Room for My Chair, but Not for My Care

From barriers to ambitions

Az (not her real name) immigrated to Canada in 2013 at age 16. She began high school here after being homeschooled due to restrictions on girls' education in her home country. Later, she joined the Law Clerk diploma program at a college to become a legal assistant.

The COVID-19 pandemic prevented Az from finishing a co-op that was part of her program, which she described as a major setback: "I was looking very forward to volunteer in a law firm where I can get some experience, then use that experience to build my career. But unfortunately, that didn't happen."

Az uses a wheelchair for mobility. She has more than ten years of experience in customer service and community work, as a volunteer and in paid jobs. She has worked as an interpreter for immigration services, in administrative and financial roles, and now volunteers as an income tax preparer at a community centre.

She enjoys helping newcomers and people from diverse backgrounds with financial systems and their rights. She is looking for new jobs and also plans to start her own business.

Signs of respect and inclusion

Az shared that in the past, it was easier for her to get interviews: "Like 3 or 4 years ago... it was easier to find work. I used to apply online and I was getting help from employment agencies... I used to get a lot of interviews, at least 3 to 4 interviews in a month."

She also found her interview experiences respectful and inclusive: "I never felt that they didn't treat me well... they were very nice, very sweet at the interview and they even asked me if I needed any accommodations."

Remote work has made it easier for her to manage personal care needs: "At home, I don't need to take off and on my jacket. It's very easy and I have my caregivers and my mom who can help me with my meal."

She highlighted that supportive supervisors, help from organizations, flexible schedules, and accessible workplaces have contributed to her positive experiences. She acknowledges, "I have been fortunate to experience working with organizations and employers where they value diversity and inclusion."

Daily struggles and systemic barriers

Despite these positives, Az has faced big challenges. Accessibility at work is a major problem — not just getting into the building but also handling daily tasks. For example, she finds it difficult to get help with things like taking off her jacket, getting her lunch from the fridge, or using the bathroom.

She says she cannot go to the bathroom alone, make coffee and tea, or heat her lunch. She also struggles to pack up at the end of the day. When she worked at a bookstore, she needed a caregiver to help her go to the bathroom: "They were sometimes late…. Or [could not] come at all because they [were] sick. So, I'm waiting for someone to take me to the bathroom and then there's nobody."

Scheduling is another main barrier because she relies on caregivers: "Because I'm physically disabled and I'm in a wheelchair... I have a set [personal] schedule which I can only change once in a while... [it would be a challenge] if I get a new schedule from work that does not work for me."

She thinks some employers view hiring persons experiencing disability as costly or difficult, which may affect their hiring decisions. Az sometimes mentions her disability on job applications, but she feels there is a risk of being underestimated. Based on advice she has received from a senior manager, she has decided not to disclose her disability to employers until she gets an interview. She says: "Most of the time I don't disclose… until [I] get an interview."

A fair chance to shine

Az suggested ways to improve job access and inclusion for persons who experience disability. She said it's important to have some flexibility and give people a chance to prove themselves: "Maybe give them a job, give them a job offer, see if they can succeed on that job, give them enough training so they can do better to perform well, to grow."

She recommended training employers to better understand and support employees with disabilities: "The training, I mean is, they should know some people are slow learners, some of them are fast learners... just being patient, everyone's needs are different."

Az also recommended that employers offer remote work and flexible schedules to meet different needs: "Employers need to be more educated about accessibility and inclusion... maybe offer some remote works, flexible hours."

She concluded that, although the government offers some support, more job opportunities are needed because there are more people looking for work: "So far, the government is doing their best... but, it's just, getting a job is tough."

Finding Work That the Body Can Hold

From arrival to aspiration

Alice (not his real name) moved to Canada in 2011 to study computer science and cognitive science at university. While studying, Alice also worked part time: "I actually started working at the hospital part time in between semesters." He finished school in 2022 and got a job. He says, "I was working in a hospital in the research department until April, but then me and my team got laid off."

Since April 2025 when he and his team lost their jobs, Alice has been getting employment insurance. He is actively job searching, focusing on positions that offer flexibility and are "disability friendly in terms of, like, what [my] body can do." Desk jobs, he notes, worsen his condition.

He explains his preferences as "Places that have more of a……people facing and like, on your feet kind of role instead of desk jobs, because actually a lot of my…. disability stuff,….at least with my back,….is very negatively affected by sitting for long periods at….a desk."

Alice lives with several long-term health problems. He says, "I have an anterior spondylosis, which means two of the bones in my spine don't sit super well." He also has osteoporosis. He continues, "I've had it since I was a kid... I also have a high risk hernia... which limits basically how much I can eat in a day. It also limits when I can eat, so I basically have to eat around at intervals of like three hours."

Working through pain

Alice's non-apparent disability has made it hard for him to get jobs and work comfortably. Pain flare-ups and physical limits often clash with strict work rules. He explains, "You just will have to work in a place that is going to cause you pain, and you will then have to manage that pain." Things like a sit-stand desk or working from home can help, but they are not always an option.

Alice says a big problem with job applications is that they don't usually offer a clear place to explain his disability or ask for help. He says, "A lot of the places where I'm applying, like in person and leaving my resume or whatever, or a cover letter, [it] doesn't feel like there's a space to leave that, because, again, my stuff is invisible."

Not being able to talk openly makes it hard for Alice to explain if a job is right for him or how a job could help him feel more stable. As Alice says, "This job would actually go a long way in giving me a sense of stability… but that's not something that you can see if you're just dropping off a resume."

When workplaces listen

Even with these challenges, Alice has had some good experiences that reflect what inclusion can look like. "Sometimes people with lived experiences understand a person better."

One example was a job interview for a personal attendant role. Even though Alice couldn't do all the physical tasks needed, the interviewer, who also experienced disability, was kind. Alice remembers, "It was still a good experience, even though I didn't get the job, because it was at least humanizing in a way."

That moment was very different from most job interviews. "The employer was understanding because they were also disabled, which made them more empathetic, honest, and open about their needs and limitations." Alice liked how "this mutual vulnerability and clear two-way communication created a more human, respectful interaction compared to typical corporate settings."

What needs to change: listening, trust, and policy

Alice's advice is simple: "Just trust people when they tell you that there's something that… is a barrier to them, whether you can see it or not… believe them, and take into account the lived experiences of people who have different needs than you." He wants employers to do more than just follow rules — he wants them to build trust and make flexibility and accommodations normal.

He also wants the government to better protect migrant and precarious workers, so they can get justice and have their rights respected. He says, "We need better protections for them… being able to access systems of accountability and justice for their basic human rights."

Alice is unsure about applying for disability benefits because the system can be limiting. "I've avoided seeking out disability benefits, for example, because I've heard that there's a lot of red tape that actually holds you down and limits how much you are able to do, instead of empowering you to seek better conditions for yourself."

Through his experiences, Alice shows how working through pain isn't just about surviving; it's about being noticed, listened to, and believed.

Finding My Way Again

Starting over and starting strong

Jennifer lives in Stratford, Prince Edward Island (PEI), with her son, who just started university. After earning a diploma in graphic design, she found herself taking on many different jobs, such as florist, plant technician, and even baker.

Eventually, she went back to school for ornamental horticulture at Nova Scotia Agricultural College. That training opened the door to a role she never expected: potato inspector. She worked at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) from 2006 to 2022, inspecting potatoes and other produce across PEI.

Jennifer was diagnosed with osteoarthritis in the early 2000s, but her symptoms became serious around 2015. Her hands, knees, hips, and other joints started limiting what she could physically do. "Going into cold warehouses and then a warm car, especially in the winter... you know, not ideal for osteoarthritis," she said. Even though she got accommodations, the work became too painful. She made the difficult decision to retire early.

When accommodation makes the difference

Jennifer's job at the CFIA had a clear process for accommodations. With a doctor's note, she no longer had to walk fields, carry heavy baskets, or crouch under equipment. "They were good," she said. "Once your doctor says you can't do something, they can't really argue with it."

Her current job at the gift shop doesn't have the same policies, but they've shown flexibility. She's allowed to use a chair when needed and received a new pair of shoes from Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW) to help with foot pain. "As soon as I have that chair and can sit down, I can focus and do my job well," she said.

But the work is still physically demanding, especially when standing for long periods. "By the end of a shift, I'm just trying to make it to the bus stop." Accommodation has become one of her biggest barriers. Her shift ends at 6 p.m., but the bus from Charlottetown to Stratford stops at 5:45 p.m., with no additional service until 8 p.m. She says, "I wrote [to] the town of Stratford, and I wrote [to] the bus, transit, and I explained my situation. I said... I have mobility issues... They said... we'll take it under advisement, but we don't really have any plans of adding anything on."

When the work stops but the bills don't

After retiring, Jennifer believed she could easily find another job. "I thought, I'll figure something out. I'll go work at Tim Hortons if I have to." But after a long wait in line at a New Year's event left her struggling to stand, she realized: "You're not going to be able to do what you did before."

She applied for many jobs but didn't get any calls back. She started to doubt herself and her options. She even tried working a few shifts as a classroom support worker, but the stairs and physical demands were too much. "I can't really do that," she said.

Jennifer began to feel invisible. She contacted the federal government to ask for help but was told to speak to her province. Then her province said she wasn't "disabled enough" to qualify for support. "There's got to be somebody to help disabled people in this country," she said. "And I couldn't find anything."

Finally, at a job fair she was directed to CCRW, where she met a staff member who had physical issues similar to her own. That changed everything. CCRW helped her find a job at a gift shop in Charlottetown. The staff had spoken to the employer ahead of time, so they already knew Jennifer would need a chair and breaks from standing. "It made all the difference going in knowing they were open to it," Jennifer said.

Searching for help in a fragmented system

Jennifer believes the biggest thing missing is a clear path to support. "There should be something that is just so obvious out there... If you have a disability, you should know exactly where to go to talk to someone." She only learned about CCRW by chance, and she wishes someone had told her sooner. "If I had known about them a year ago, it might have been a whole lot different."

She thinks the government needs to do more to connect people to resources. "I should have been able to walk into Service Canada and sit down with someone who could say, here's what's available." She also wishes more employers were aware of how small accommodations can lead to great employees. "Just because someone can't stand long doesn't mean they can't work. I can help people, answer questions, support customers. I just need a place to sit."

She would also like supported employment organizations to offer additional guidance, maybe by providing a list of employers already open to hiring people with mobility issues.

Employment Stories on Video

Some job seekers and employees experiencing disability chose to share their employment journey on video. A summary of their stories is written below.

Access the following videos on CASE's YouTube channel to explore their stories.

Video Part 1

Participants describe the employment challenges they've faced.

Video Part 2

Participants share how employment could be more inclusive of persons experiencing disability.

Table of Content

Tina Blenkhorn

Be Willing to Invest in Me — and I'll Invest in You

Tina had always been obese, which caused mobility issues, and she was diagnosed with anxiety, depression, and ADHD. She requires adaptations to manage at work.

Tina has a teaching degree and years of experience, but she could only find part-time positions, leading to inconsistent work. She also worked in tech support, and her employer was very accommodating, for instance by providing an ergonomic chair.

Over the years, Tina was often told that she didn't quite fit in. She explains that *"there's the fact that I've never been small, so people have always questioned, 'Are you going to be able to do the job?' I wouldn't have applied if I didn't think I could do it, give me a chance."*

The main challenge for Tina is whether employers and colleagues are accepting. And they can't be accepting without information. She would like employers to just be willing to work with her.

"If you will invest in me, then I invest in you, you know."

Chris Lytle

Respect People — Let Them Get to Work

Chris experiences physical disability and mental health challenges. For the past 20 years, he has worked mainly with non-governmental organizations focused on disability. *"People with disabilities are sort of often told that … if they're going to get involved in an industry, that industry is to look after other people with disabilities."*

It's frustrating to him that interviewers automatically think "this person has a disability and will require an accommodation," rather than "how is this job seeker going to help my organization progress."

Disclosing has been a challenge. "*I've been to some places that told me they were going to put my resume at the bottom of the pile, automatically."* Soft disclosure is particularly problematic because, rather than focusing on what workers need to do the job, people ask personal questions about the disability.

"We want to be respected the same level as everybody else. … Accommodations don't mean anything aside from allowing them to work, let them get to work."

Taranom Chamani

Before You Say No, Let Me Try

Taranom, who is blind, came to Canada in 2012 from Iran, where she worked in packaging at a factory. She earned an English high school diploma in Canada and would have liked to continue her education but was facing mental health challenges.

For about seven years she has been searching for a job, without luck. When she mentioned her packaging experience to a factory manager, he said he couldn't hire her for safety reasons, even though they have workers who are Deaf or have autism.

She wishes organizations could help fill out a form or solve a problem right away, without waiting one to three months. She would also like agencies to understand that it's impossible to get Canadian experience unless someone is willing to hire you.

Taranom asked one agency for help to write a resume and find a job.

"She said how can you take a shower when you can't see and you want to work. And to be honest, my tears came to my eyes, and I said, you are working in an agency and you are living in Canada, and how can you ask these questions from a person who you don't know. … for a week or two weeks I was depressed … People need to be more educated, more, more, more, more."

Rather than focus only on disability, she would like people to concentrate on abilities. *"If I couldn't do whatever you need, then I can understand, I am not able to do it. At least give, let me try, myself, before you say no, let me try, you know, give me a chance."*

Rene Welsh

Offer Supports for Disability and Other Needs

A Special Olympics athlete, Rene, who has Asperger's syndrome, has worked at a grocery store for 17 years as a courtesy clerk. He had hoped to work in the meat department, which would have offered full-time work. However, that position never materialized.

"I'll be honest, there's days I wish I didn't have autism. … And this is not against those who has it, it's just, that's how I feel. Because there's days, I just like, I do struggle to go out. … Or when someone overwhelms you, it hurts. Or something may be minor for some people, but for me it's different."

When Rene was hurt for eight months, it wasn't easy for him to find a job. It also wasn't easy to survive when 95% of the money he received was going towards rent.

It's very important to him to have a job and remain independent. *"I don't really want to ask for help from my parents. That's a last resort. Cause I want to show them that I can be independent."*

Rene would advise the government to step up on disability and other supports. *"Put your money where your mouth is, start helping people with disabilities, on everything, because last time I checked, we're human, in spite of having a disability."*

Employer Perspectives of Workplace Accessibility and Inclusion

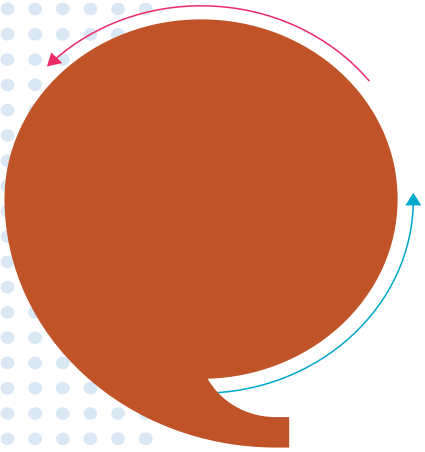
Organizations today need different perspectives, lived experiences, and ways of thinking to remain competitive. Diverse teams challenge assumptions, prevent stagnation, and help leaders and organizations grow.

For workplace inclusion to be successful, we must:

- normalize disability employment inclusion
- consider employer realities
- integrate inclusion into all roles: staff, managers and supervisors, and leaders
- find a way to shift awareness into practical action

Some of the most common challenges are the most difficult to address — fears rooted in misconceptions about disability, risk aversion due to low margins, and lack of capacity and support.

The more conversations we have at all levels — locally, provincially/territorially, and nationally — the more these challenges can be addressed through community relationships, collaborations, and policy changes.



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President and CEO, ECO Canada

Introduction to the interviewee

Kevin is the President and CEO of ECO Canada and has held this role for a little over nine years. ECO Canada is a national workforce development organization dedicated to supporting Canada's environmental workforce across the green and blue economies. Its mandate is to ensure "there's an adequate supply [of] competent people to meet the current and future needs" of the sector.

ECO Canada works across recruitment, training, professional certification (environmental professional designation), labour market research, and accreditation of post-secondary programs to ensure alignment with industry needs. Kevin previously worked in oil and gas, including experience in Norway (his home country), Texas, and Ukraine, before joining ECO Canada. His background informs a strong focus on applied skills, employer needs, and workforce adaptability.

1 How has your association/organization created opportunities to increase diversity amongst your partners? What programs or initiatives have you championed?

Kevin described two main approaches: strategic employer guidance and program-level interventions.

At the strategic level, ECO Canada advises employers to move away from competing for the same narrow "ideal candidate" pool and instead look to hidden pools of talent, including persons with disabilities. He emphasized that many employers exclude these candidates unintentionally, while individuals with disabilities may also self-exclude by assuming they are not qualified.

At the program level, ECO Canada administers federally funded employment programs that include specific targets for underrepresented groups, including persons with disabilities. These programs often provide salary reimbursements to employers, offsetting perceived risk and encouraging inclusive hiring. Kevin explained that ECO Canada acts as a delivery agent: government funds flow through ECO Canada to employers.

He highlighted the effectiveness of this approach, stating:

"If you give someone a chance and you lower the risk to the employer… the success rate of those programs is tremendous. We have usually well over 95% success rate in terms of ongoing employment."

2 **Why did your association/organization choose to invest in diversity? What value does your organization see in diversity in the context of employment?**

Kevin framed diversity primarily as a business and competitiveness strategy, not an ideological goal. In tight labour markets, diversity allows employers to access talent pools others overlook, reducing recruitment pressure and cost.

He also emphasized diversity's role in innovation, particularly in the context of AI and rapid technological change. Organizations need different perspectives, lived experiences, and ways of thinking to remain competitive. He noted that diversity should not be "optical diversity that looks good on a poster," but rather a meaningful mix of competencies, experiences, and viewpoints.

From a leadership perspective, Kevin added that diverse teams challenge assumptions and prevent stagnation: leaders grow when confronted with perspectives that do not immediately align with their own.

3 **Does your organization provide training or support to help your own staff understand accessibility and feel confident in working with persons who experience disability? Is there also training available to meet the specific needs of employees who experience disability?**

Kevin confirmed that ECO Canada provides internal training on equity, diversity, and inclusion to help staff engage appropriately with employers and job seekers.

However, ECO Canada does not provide training tailored to specific disabilities (for example, blindness, autism, mobility impairments). Kevin was explicit that the organization deliberately avoids this due to a lack of specialized expertise and concern about unintended consequences. He stated:

"The more you push the employer … the more that they will quietly move back and disappear."

Instead, ECO Canada focuses on helping individuals understand workforce expectations and helping employers focus on value and contribution, rather than disability-specific knowledge. Kevin noted that ECO Canada would be open to hosting or distributing third-party training developed by qualified experts but would not develop or deliver such training itself.

4 **What training do you offer to partners on inclusive hiring practices and/or creating an accessible workplace?**

Kevin explained that ECO Canada supports partners through:

- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and inclusive hiring training
- HR strategy consulting
- Guidance on accessing underutilized talent pools
- Support in developing inclusive recruitment and retention strategies

This training is framed around helping employers succeed operationally, not imposing obligations. ECO Canada avoids prescriptive or compliance-heavy approaches that might increase employer fear of liability or litigation.

Kevin emphasized that maintaining employer trust is essential, stating that once employers disengage, "they're hard to get back."

5 **What factors or elements of your association's diversity initiatives have contributed to positive impacts on persons who experience disability and their employment journeys?**

Kevin pointed to qualitative outcomes rather than formal quantitative metrics. ECO Canada has produced videos and case examples showcasing successful employment outcomes, including stories of persons with disabilities thriving in environmental careers.

One example that stood out to him involved a deaf employee in an environmental consulting firm. The employer made accommodations, gained a highly competent and loyal employee, and benefited long-term from the relationship. Kevin emphasized reciprocity, noting that when people are given a chance, they often "want to give back to the employer."

He also highlighted how technology (for example, drones, remote monitoring) has expanded access to environmental work for individuals previously excluded due to physical barriers.

6 What factors or elements do you think hinder persons who experience disability from having a successful employment experience?

Kevin identified several interrelated barriers:

- Employer fear of liability and litigation, particularly around termination of the contracts for specific groups (such as persons with disability)
- Risk aversion driven by thin profit margins in many sectors
- People internalizing rejection and focusing on discrimination rather than what they have to contribute

He stressed that difficulty finding a first job is universal and cautioned against assuming rejection is solely due to disability. Kevin stated:

"You should never focus on that. Never focus on that. You have to focus on the positive. What do you have to offer?"

Ultimately, he emphasized that attitude matters most, concluding plainly:

"Their own attitude makes all the difference in the world."

7 Given everything that we have talked about, what would improve accessibility, inclusivity, and long-term positive employment for persons who experience disability?

Kevin argued that meaningful improvement requires a mutual mindset shift. Employers must see persons with disabilities as assets, and individuals must see themselves as assets to employers. If both sides adopt this framing, many structural barriers diminish.

He also emphasized the importance of government incentives, particularly wage subsidies and sector-specific programs, to offset employer risk — especially in industries with low profit margins.

Finally, Kevin recommended sector-based policy design rather than one-size-fits-all approaches, noting that economic realities differ drastically across sectors and must shape inclusive employment strategies.

A Director in Tourism HR Canada

Introduction to the interviewee

The interviewee is a Director at Tourism HR Canada, a pan-Canadian nonprofit organization serving as the workforce council for Canada's tourism sector. She has been with the organization for over five years and has served in her current director role since the summer of 2023.

She immigrated to Canada in 2010 with a background in Law and later gained certification in Human Resource Management. Before joining Tourism HR Canada, she worked multiple years in immigrant-serving agencies in Ottawa, supporting newcomers' labour market integration. Her work at Tourism HR Canada initially focused on newcomer employment in tourism and later expanded to workforce inclusion initiatives for persons who experience disability.

She has led Belong, a federally funded, three-year, pan-Canadian initiative supported by Employment and Social Development Canada's Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities, aimed at helping tourism employers become more accessible and inclusive.

1 How has your association/organization created opportunities to increase diversity amongst your partners? What programs or initiatives have you championed?

Tourism HR Canada's primary diversity-focused initiative is the Belong project, described by the interviewee as an umbrella initiative with multiple interconnected components. Belong is employer-facing, intentionally designed to create systemic workplace change rather than focusing on individual job placement.

They explained that Belong includes:

- Research, surveys, focus groups
- Accessible, Inclusive Employment Training (for example, e-learning courses)
- Tourism Workplace Accessibility Clinic
- Talent referral program: designed to bridge the gap between job seekers with disabilities and inclusive employers in the tourism sector
- Employer Mentorship Program
- Employer Disability Inclusion Toolkit

As she emphasized:

"We don't work directly with individuals… [we work to] make the systemic change of the workplaces, [meaning] the environment. So, the employers will be ready to welcome, integrate and retain people with disabilities."

The program is guided by an advisory committee that includes people with disabilities, employers, service providers, and sector associations, ensuring the initiative reflects lived experience and employer realities.

2 Why did your association/organization choose to invest in diversity? What value does your organization see in diversity in the context of employment?

The interviewee framed diversity as fundamental to the tourism sector's identity and sustainability. Tourism is a people-centred industry serving a diverse visitor base, and she argued that workplaces should reflect that diversity.

She explained:

"It's very essential for us to prepare our businesses well enough to meet all of the diverse needs."

She also highlighted that tourism has historically functioned as a workforce gateway for underrepresented groups, including people with disabilities, women, racialized Canadians, and newcomers. From a business perspective, she emphasized that people with disabilities represent an "untapped talent pool," particularly important amid chronic labour shortages exacerbated by the pandemic.

3 Does your organization provide training or support to help your own staff understand accessibility and feel confident in working with persons who experience disability? Is there also training available to meet the specific needs of employees who experience disability?

Yes, Tourism HR Canada has taken steps to build internal accessibility capacity. When launching the Belong project, the organization:

- Partnered with accessibility consultants to review internal communications and its website
- Updated branding and design to improve accessibility
- Delivered internal workshops on accessible communication
- Participated in the federal 50–30 Challenge, which included diversity training

She acknowledged, however, that this work is ongoing:

"Definitely there are still more we could do, for sure."

The organization does not currently provide individualized disability-specific training for employees, but focuses on organizational readiness, communication, and awareness.

4 **What training do you offer to partners on inclusive hiring practices and/or creating an accessible workplace?**

Through the Belong project, Tourism HR Canada developed a suite of eight free e-learning modules, organized into three learning pathways aligned with organizational roles:

- Frontline staff: supporting colleagues with disabilities and fostering inclusive team environments
- Managers and supervisors: practical HR practices, team management, and workplace accommodation
- Senior leaders: embedding accessibility into business strategy, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and organizational planning

The interviewee explained that accessibility is framed not as compliance but as leadership and business strategy:
"The senior leader course focus on how to embed accessibility as a business strategy."

Although the examples are tourism-specific, she noted that the principles are universally applicable across sectors.

5 **What factors or elements of your association's diversity initiatives have contributed to positive impacts on persons who experience disability and their employment journeys?**

Positive impacts were most clearly observed through employer feedback and storytelling. Employers frequently reported that employees with disabilities were among their most loyal and effective workers, particularly when accommodations were co-designed with the employee.

She noted:

"As long as they give the opportunity to people with disabilities, they are the most loyal employees in the organization."

Employers also began to see inclusive hiring not just as "the right thing to do" but as a business advantage. The project's videos and peer learning opportunities helped normalize these experiences across the sector.

6 **What factors or elements do you think hinder persons who experience disability from having a successful employment experience?**

The interviewee identified several major barriers:

a. Employer mindset and leadership culture

She repeatedly emphasized that leadership sets the tone:

"The biggest challenge will be the mindset from the employer, from the leaders."

b. Public policy disincentives

She described how disability benefits can be clawed back when individuals work additional hours, creating a financial paradox where working more yields no net gain. This, she explained, can limit career growth and advancement opportunities.

c. Liability fears rooted in misconceptions

While acknowledging employer concerns about workplace health and safety, she argued that these fears are often based on assumptions rather than evidence:

"It's really about the employer's mindset… it's not opposite correlation."

d. Competing business priorities

Small tourism businesses, often with fewer than 10 employees, may lack formal HR structures and the capacity to prioritize inclusion without external support.

7 **Given everything that we have talked about, what would improve accessibility, inclusivity, and long-term positive employment for persons who experience disability?**

The interviewee proposed several interlinked improvements:

- Leadership training focused on inclusive leadership and mindset change
- Increased funding for accessibility infrastructure, especially for small and medium-sized businesses
- Better mechanisms to translate awareness into hiring action, noting that participation drops sharply between learning and actual employment decisions
- Policy reform to redesign disability benefits as incentives for work rather than deterrents
- Exploring tax credits (rather than short-term wage subsidies) for employers and employees to support long-term retention
- Sustainable, multi-year funding for successful initiatives instead of short-term project cycles

She summarized the core challenge succinctly:

"How to shift the awareness to a practical action… I don't have a solution yet."

Reflection and Conversations

For Employment Service Providers

Reflection on your own

1. Read the stories and/or view the videos.
2. Read and reflect on the questions for service providers.
3. Think about how you could enhance your work with clients and employers.

Conversations with service providers

1. Read the stories and/or view the videos together or separately.
2. Review the additional resources available.
3. Have a group conversation to reflect on the "Discussion questions for service providers."

Conversations with the public

Service providers can have conversations about these issues and share the resources, including this kit, with employers, persons with lived experience, advocates, community organizations, educators, or others.

You can organize events to:

1. Read a few stories and/or view the videos.
2. Facilitate a conversation around the "Discussions Questions for the Public." Questions can be chosen based on your audience.
3. Share the additional resources in this kit and the services offered by your organization, as needed.

All the discussion questions for the public are simplified versions of the discussion questions for service providers. We recommend discussing and reflecting on the questions for service providers before a public event.

For the Public

(employers, persons with lived experience, disability advocates, community organizations, educators, and others)

Reflection on your own

1. Read the stories or view the videos on your own to learn more about what works well and what makes it harder for persons experiencing disability during their employment journey.
2. Read and reflect on the "Discussion Questions for the Public." Explore the additional resources for more information.

Conversation with a Group

1. Read a few stories and view the videos with a group.
2. Choose questions from "Discussion Questions for the Public" to have a conversation about the issues faced by persons who experience disability.
3. Explore the additional resources for more information.

Conversations with People

1. After reading and reflecting on your own, you can engage in friendly, respectful conversations with people about disability and employment.

We'd love your feedback!

Please take 5 minutes to complete a short evaluation to let us know if you explored the stories, viewed the videos, reflected on your own, and/or had conversations with others about disability and employment. Thank you!

If you have any questions about this story kit, please email CASE at contact@supportedemployment.ca.

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Discussion Questions for **Employment Service Providers**

For many of the job seekers and employees in the stories, disabilities could be accommodated but traditional rigid employment systems made participation difficult or impossible. Examples of barriers included fixed schedules, inflexible job design, mandatory in-person work, and narrow productivity norms.

Participants mentioned that flexible hours, task modification, remote or hybrid work, and pacing allowed them to perform effectively without reducing expectations or quality of work.

- **Is there anything we, in the supported employment sector, can do to create positive systemic change related to rigid workplace expectations?**

  Positive systemic change: a lasting change that transforms underlying structures, policies, power dynamics, or mindsets to address the root causes of an issue and to prevent it. It moves beyond small, temporary fixes to create sustainable, fundamental change.

Positive employment experiences for participants experiencing disability often came from one supportive person in the workplace, rather than from organizational policies or practices. One industry representative mentioned that what was needed was a mechanism to translate employer learning and awareness into hiring action and actual employment decisions.

- **Have some businesses in your community reached the awareness phase without having moved forward with inclusive hiring?**
- **If you answer yes, do you have a sense of what might be preventing them from hiring more inclusively?**

Small businesses comprise 98% of businesses in Canadian communities, and most small businesses have limited HR capacity and resources.

- **How could supported employment practitioners and our sector as a whole help more local small businesses to develop — and to actively implement — inclusive policies and practices?**
- **What would local practitioners need to support businesses?**

"Meaningful improvement in workplace accessibility and inclusion requires a mutual mindset shift. If employers see persons experiencing disability as assets and persons experiencing disability see themselves as assets to employers, many structural barriers diminish." – Kevin, President and CEO of ECO Canada

"The biggest challenge will be the mindset from the employer, from the leaders." – Director at Tourism HR Canada

- **What are your thoughts about these quotes?**
- **How could these perspectives be translated into actions service providers can take with job seekers and employers?**

Kevin from ECO Canada emphasized that maintaining employer trust is essential, because once employers disengage it's hard to get them back. He mentioned that many employers fear litigation or liability and the expense of workers experiencing disability when margins are tight.

The Director at Tourism HR Canada said that, while she acknowledged employer concerns about workplace health and safety, these fears are often based on assumptions rather than evidence.

- **How can employers' fears and concerns be addressed and their trust gained and maintained in the long term?**

Many of the job seekers and employees in this study face employment challenges related to unpredictable health or inconsistent services, and they would like more jobs designed for their reality.

For instance, Rina has talent and a strong track record in contract work, but she struggles to find jobs that match her changing health and energy levels. Az finds it difficult to get help with tasks like taking off her jacket, and sometimes caregivers don't show up to assist with the bathroom, putting her in an uncomfortable situation.

- **How can workplaces and employees best adapt to the unpredictable nature of health or inconsistent support services?**
- **What are your thoughts about Rina's suggestion to build a database where companies could find temporary or contract services, for example transcription, provided by persons experiencing disability?**

Disclosure can pose a dilemma for many persons experiencing disability, especially those with non-apparent disability. Research by CASE and Signal49 Research has shown that when inclusion is embedded into all aspects of an organization, employees can access support without being compelled to disclose.

- **What are the benefits of a fully inclusive workplace?**
- **How can inclusion be embedded into an organization to facilitate support without disclosure?**
- **What role does trust play in an inclusive workplace?**
- **How could organizations measure their inclusion initiatives without employee disclosure?**

Technology is everywhere and most employers use technology for some aspects of recruitment. Some job seekers are comfortable with technology, while others struggle and/or experience anxiety or frustration with virtual interviews, digital-only communication, and inaccessible platforms.

- **What types of digital concerns have you encountered with clients and how did you assist them?**
- **Some clients struggle with access to consistent and/or quality internet. How can they be supported?**

Employment supports significantly helped participants shift from isolation and confusion to clarity and opportunity. However, access to supports was inconsistent and was often discovered by chance. Tina also mentioned that there are often many hoops to jump through to access support.

- **How can we, as a sector and as professionals, create greater public awareness of supported employment services? How can we reach more persons experiencing disability seeking employment?**
- **Funding often defines programs and services, who can be supported, and organizational capacity. What funding changes would significantly improve the level of services provided? What could we do on an organizational level and as a sector to advocate for those changes?**

Zaal suggests that "Knowledge is not coming from pure information. It's coming from [meaningful] exposure." He proposes involving people with lived experience to design training programs and having more real-world interactions—preferably in workplaces.

- **Do you know whether the workplace inclusion training you recommend was designed by or with involvement by persons experiencing disability?**
- **Are there ways to create more opportunities for real-world interaction and conversation between persons experiencing disability and employers?**
- **Could more interactions with persons experiencing disability help to mitigate employer fears and fill in knowledge gaps?**

Discussion Questions for **the Public**

Public includes employers, persons who experience disability, advocates, community organizations, educators, and anyone else interested in learning more about disability and employment.

Some of the job seekers and employees in this study said that inflexible policies at work often made their job difficult or impossible. Examples of inflexible policies included fixed schedules, the way their job was designed, or having to work in person.

- **Are there ways that employers and persons experiencing disability can work together to identify challenges in workplace policies and try to find solutions?**

One in five workers in Canada experiences some type of disability. Many job seekers and workers experience non-apparent disability, which is also called invisible disability. For instance, people might have mental health challenges, chronic pain, or flexibility and mobility issues.

Employers and managers may not always know when a person has a disability or what barriers they're facing at work. And job seekers and workers may not always feel comfortable or safe talking about disability.

- **What could employers do to make their workplaces more inclusive for all workers?**
- **What can be done to help job seekers and employees feel comfortable and safe disclosing a disability?**

Potential answers:

- Refine workplace policies to make them more inclusive (check CASE's HR Inclusive Policy Toolkit). For example:
  - inclusive hiring processes
  - provide clear information in different formats during onboarding (examples: accessible pdf, video, or audio file)
- Have regular conversations, whether casual or formal, with each employee to make sure they have everything they need to do their job.
- Prepare an individual plan for each employee that includes what they need to do their job, accommodations, their career aspirations, training needed, and anything else that's meaningful.
- Believe and trust job seekers and employees when they make a request or disclose a disability.
- Leadership that models inclusive behaviours and talks about inclusion has a significant influence on creating a safe, respectful workplace where all employees feel valued.

One participant in the study said that having interactions between employers and persons experiencing disability is the best way to learn about disability and what's needed for inclusion.

- **How could we create more opportunities for interactions between persons experiencing disability and employers? How could we bring them together?**

Discussion Questions for **Employers**

- **Do you have any questions about disability inclusion in your workplace?**
  - **You can contact an employment service provider to provide advice and support. Check the Additional Resources section for a link to the National Service Provider Registry.**
- **Are there any challenges that you're currently facing or that are holding you back from hiring persons who experience disability?**

Discussion Questions for **Persons Experiencing Disability**

- **What challenges have you faced while searching for employment or working in a job?**
- **When you needed help to find employment or to manage challenges or barriers in your job, did you know who to go to for support? Did you receive the support you needed?**

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Additional Resources

The following are complimentary resources developed by the Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE).

For persons experiencing disability

- MentorAbility: short mentoring experiences for job and career exploration
- National Service Provider Registry: find a supported employment service provider near you who can help you find, retain, and advance at work

For employers

- HR Inclusive Policy Tool Kit: step-by-step guidance for inclusive workplace policies
- MentorAbility: opportunities for staff to gain professional development by mentoring persons experiencing disability
- Short online courses: on topics related to workplace accessibility and inclusion
- National Service Provider Registry: find a supported employment service provider near you who can help access untapped talent, support a worker experiencing disability, or provide advice with workplace inclusion
- Employer newsletter: monthly resources and events in your inbox related to disability in the workplace
- Blog posts: practical, actionable information on various issues around workplace disability inclusion

For employment service providers

- Service provider newsletter: monthly resources and events related to supported employment
- Certificate programs: strengthen your skills to support job seekers and workers experiencing disability and employers
- CASE membership: take your employment practice to the next level

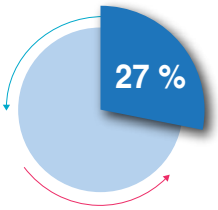
For more information

Visit the CASE website: supportedemployment.ca

Disability in Canada

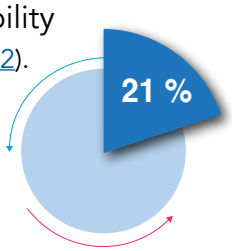
In Canada,

8 million people or **27%** of Canadians aged 15 years and older have one or more disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2022).

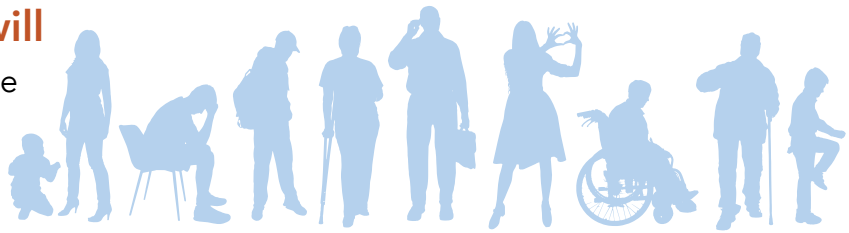


In the labour force,

21% or **one in five** working-age Canadians experience some form of disability (Statistics Canada, 2022).



Most people will experience some type of disability in their lifetime.



Disability can take many forms, including non-apparent disabilities that may not be visible to others.

Disability can also be **permanent, temporary, or episodic** (occurring at various times).

Non-apparent disabilities can include: mental health challenges, neurodivergence (ADHD, autism, dyslexia), chronic pain, flexibility and mobility issues, hearing loss, arthritis, and many others