

Toward Inclusion of People with Disabilities in the Workplace

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Disability and exclusion

As proposed by the World Health Organization, people are considered to have a disability or activity limitation if they have a physical or mental condition, or a health problem that restricts their ability to perform activities that are normal for their age. Exclusion due to disability is now generally considered to be the result of a failure by society and employers to accommodate different levels of ability through the provision of appropriate supports and accommodations and elimination of discrimination, rather than a medical condition of individuals. Canadian disability rights groups have put forward an action agenda for an inclusive and accessible Canada, noting that, while progress has been made, many Canadians with disabilities and their families continue to experience major barriers to their full and equal participation in Canadian society.

While many of these barriers exist in the community, lack of access to and supports in the workplace are increasingly recognized as a key aspect of exclusion and marginalization of many persons with disabilities (OECD 2003). While it is certainly true that many people with disabilities are unable to participate in the paid workforce, it is also true that many others could work, and would like to work, but are prevented from doing so because of discrimination and barriers. The goal should be to facilitate inclusion into the job market consistent with people's desires and abilities.

While the situation of persons with disabilities in the job market is very poor, there is increasing support for positive changes. The federal and provincial governments have begun to

advance a more positive agenda, and funding for community and employment supports is slowly increasing (Human Resources and Social Development Canada 2006). In part, due to a series of far-reaching legal decisions, employers are also increasingly obliged to accommodate the special needs of workers with disabilities, which is of particular importance to workers who have stable employment and then become ill or are injured. Disability rights organizations are extremely active in pushing an inclusion agenda which includes workplace inclusion, and this has influenced union bargaining priorities. There would be many more opportunities in the workforce for persons with disabilities if adequate supports and services were to be provided, and if differences were to be properly accommodated. This requires changes in the workplace itself as well as supportive changes to public policies, such as income support programs.

Defining "disability"

Statistics Canada's *Participation and Activity Limitation Survey* (PALS) tracks persons whose activities are limited because of a physical or mental health-related condition or problem. By this definition, which covers a very broad range of limitations in terms of both type and severity, the total disability rate in 2006 was 11.5% for the total Canadian working-age population (15 to 64)—or 2.5 million people—rising to 15.1% for those aged 45 to 54, and 22.8% for those aged 55 to 64 (Statistics Canada 2006). None of us can be certain that we will never experience a major activity limitation over the course of our working lives.

Disability rates rise significantly with age, partly because of health risks due to increasing age alone, and partly due to injuries or an accumulated lifetime exposure to unhealthy working conditions. Many older workers experience chronic pain arising from repetitive or heavy work or from injuries, and mental illness is increasingly prevalent due to the stresses of the contemporary workplace. Disability rates are slightly higher among women than men and much higher—two to three times the national average—

among Aboriginal Canadians mainly because of high rates of poverty and deprivation.

About four in ten adults with a disability report a severe or very severe disability, and most persons with activity limitations report multiple conditions. In fact, 65% report three or more disabilities. Many conditions are time limited or episodic. Roughly one-half of all persons with disabilities experience a continuing, long-term disability, while many more working-age Canadians experience a temporary disability at some time, often as the result of workplace injuries, an accident, or a disease that eventually responds to treatment.

The most common forms of disability among adults are those related to mobility, agility or pain, followed by difficulties in hearing and seeing, all of which are more common as workers age.

Exclusion from the job market

The evidence shows, not surprisingly, that working-age persons with disabilities, particularly long-term and severe disabilities, are much less likely to hold paid jobs than are other Canadians (Statistics Canada 2008). This may reflect an inability to work at all, or, in many other cases, discrimination and/or a lack of appropriate supports and accommodations. In 2006, just over one-half (51%) of persons with disabilities were employed, compared to three in four persons without disabilities. This employment rate is a bit higher than in most other industrial countries, though definitions vary. Canada, however, spends considerably less, as a share of the economy, on both disability supports and services, and on disability-related income supports than do many European countries (OECD 2003). The gap in employment rates in Canada between persons with and without disabilities is even higher among older age groups, and is a bit higher among women than among men.

Employment rates are especially low for persons with severe disabilities. While this reflects the fact that some of these people are simply unable to engage in paid work, government support

programs also tend to focus on younger persons and on low cost interventions. Employment rates are lowest (under 40%) for those with developmental and communication disabilities, whereas employment rates are closer to average for those with hearing problems and problems with pain, mobility, and agility. Likely the latter are barriers to employment in a narrower range of jobs. Persons with mental disabilities are also more likely to experience discrimination. Unemployment rates are also significantly higher for persons with disabilities—10% compared to 6% in 2006—showing that exclusion from jobs is partly due to barriers to finding work, and not just due to inability to work.

Despite lower rates of participation in the paid workforce and higher unemployment, there were still well over one million workers with disabilities in Canada in 2006, almost evenly divided between women and men. While such workers are to be found in virtually all industries and occupations, they are significantly under-represented in managerial, supervisory, and professional occupations. Interestingly, the unionization rates of workers with and without disabilities are about the same.

While some disabilities preclude regular paid employment, even if community and workplace supports were to be in place, lack of employment is most often due to a failure by society and by employers to address barriers to employment, and to accommodate differences (OECD 2003; Fawcett 1996). Many persons with disabilities need some help in the home or the community and/or assistive aids and devices, or have special travel needs, or need flexible hours, or specially designed and configured work stations. If these supports and services were in place, rates of employment would undoubtedly be much higher.

Participation in the labour market is an important part of life for Canadians seeking personal independence and long-term financial security, and should be consciously promoted as a viable choice for people with activity limitations. In addition to finding employment, a person with a disability may be limited in the amount or kind of work they can do; they may require workplace

accommodations, such as modified hours or duties or structural modifications. In 2006, about two in three Canadians aged 15 to 64 with an activity limitation who were not in the labour force reported that they were completely prevented from working. These non-participants in the paid workforce were much more likely to report a severe or very severe disability. In contrast to people who were completely prevented from working, the 2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) explored whether people felt that their condition limited the amount or kind of work they could do as opposed to completely preventing work. In 2006, more than four out of 10 persons with an activity limitation who were employed reported that they were indeed limited. In other words, the problem is not just exclusion from jobs, but also lack of accommodations and supports which would allow those who are working to work with less difficulty, and also to work at their full potential.

Workplace accommodations

Workplace accommodations are defined by Statistics Canada as modifications to the job or work environment that can enable a person with an activity limitation to participate fully in the work environment. These modifications can include many things ranging from modified hours or duties and software or hardware modifications, to structural items, such as handrails or accessible washrooms.

Table 1: Types of modifications required in order to be able to work, by severity, Canada, 2006

Type of workplace accommodation	Mild or moderate (%)	Severe or very severe (%)
Modified hours or days	14.0	41.1
Special chair or back support	12.4	30.3
Job redesign	9.6	30.3
Modified or ergonomic workstation	8.8	17.1
Other equipment, help, or work arrangement	3.2	5.1
Accessible elevator	2.0	6.9
Appropriate parking	2.0	10.3
Accessible washrooms	1.9	9.7
Accessible transportation	1.6	6.4
Human support	1.6	6.6
Technical aids	1.0	3.5
Computer modifications	0.6	5.2
Handrails or ramps	0.5	7.3
Communication aids	0.3	n/a

Source: Statistics Canada, Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2006

Statistics Canada reports that the most common workplace accommodation required for employed people with activity limitations is modified hours or days, or reduced work hours, reported by about one in five workers. Approximately one in six workers with an activity limitation required a special chair or back support (16.5%) or a job redesign (14.2%), while about one in ten require a modified or ergonomic workstation (10.7%). The need for supports is generally greater for older workers. On average, two-thirds (65%) of workers with disabilities report that their need for a workplace modification has been met, but this rate is higher for those with less severe activity limitations. Unfortunately, the rate of satisfaction with workplace modifications seems to have been falling.

Persons with activity limitations who are not in the labour force or are unemployed tend to have more severe limitations, and thus have even greater requirements for workplace accommodations in order to be able to work. For women with disabilities who are not in the workforce, the most common cited and needed workplace accommodations are modified hours or days (30%), job redesign (24.%), and special chair or back support (21%). Modified hours or days and job redesign are the most common needed accommodation cited by men with disabilities not working or unemployed (28% for both).

Why is workplace accommodation so problematic?

The Canadian Council on Social Development has closely studied the problem of workplace exclusion. They report as follows: “Our findings... indicate that there is a fairly high requirement for some type of workplace accommodation among those with disabilities, but these requirements are often for things that do not seem difficult to provide. Since modified workstations and accessible parking are the most commonly required structures, and modified work hours and job redesign are the most commonly required aids, one might think that these items would be relatively

simple to provide. Instead, however, a fairly high number of individuals have unmet needs for these items, and these unmet needs can act as major barriers to their labour force participation and economic security.”

In a recent report by the Canadian Abilities Foundation (CAF) using data gathered specifically for their study, similar conclusions are drawn. While the requirement for workplace accommodations is fairly high, these accommodations are usually not terribly costly. They estimated that “annual workplace accommodation costs are under \$1,500 for almost all workers who have a disability.” According to their study, for just over half of those requiring some type of accommodation, the estimated cost would be less than \$500 per person per year; for one-third, the cost would be \$500 to \$1,500 per year; and for 16%, the cost was estimated at over \$1,500. These costs are probably much lower than many employers realize. For many persons with disabilities, an employer’s reluctance to provide accommodation on the job can be extremely disheartening and frustrating: “Employers are still ignorant about what it takes to hire and accommodate a person with a disability.” (CCSD 2005)

Discrimination

Discrimination through discouragement or even exclusion can be a difficult obstacle for people with disabilities. Data from the PALS Survey show that, in 2006, one in four unemployed persons with a disability and one in eight persons with a disability who were not in the labour force believed that, in the past five years, they had been refused a job because of their disability. One in twelve employed persons with a disability also reported that they had experienced discrimination, with the proportion reporting discrimination increasing with the severity of activity limitations.

Incomes and wages

Many disabled adults are supported by a working spouse or partner, and some collect reasonable disability benefits from

private insurance. But, for many others, exclusion from the job market often means having to live in poverty. Approximately one in three persons with a disability receive some kind of (low) government income benefit—with 10% receiving social assistance, 10% receiving disability benefits under the Canada or Quebec Pension Plan, 5% receiving workers' compensation for a work-related accident or injury, and 6% receiving a veterans' benefit (Prince 2008). By contrast, just 6% are collecting disability benefits from a private insurance company. Such benefits typically replace a high share of previous wages, but only about one-half of the workforce has such coverage.

Canada provides very modest disability benefits under the Canada/Quebec Pension Plan to some persons with disabilities, but many disabled persons, particularly those without a long work history, rely on social assistance benefits. These persons almost invariably fall below the poverty line, even though some provinces provide somewhat higher benefits to those who can prove that they are unable to work. The poverty rate for persons with disabilities aged 16 to 64 is about one in four, or two and one-half times as high as the general population, and persons with disabilities are more than four times as likely to experience long-term poverty (Human Resources Development Canada 2001).

A key problem with CPP/QPP disability benefits and most disability benefits paid by provinces as part of their social assistance programs is that they require recipients to demonstrate a severe and ongoing disability which precludes paid work. While this may seem reasonable on the surface, it means that persons with activity limitations who could work part-time or part-year are placed in a Catch-22 situation, forced to choose between giving up their benefits (and, often, access to prescription drugs and supported housing), and very insecure and low incomes from employment. If they choose the latter, it is very difficult to re-qualify for disability-related benefits. A better solution would be to supplement the wages of persons with disabilities who want to

work, but, for various reasons, can work for only limited hours or periods of time (Prince 2008; Priest 2008).

The OECD has set as a policy goal the maximum feasible participation of people with disabilities in the job market, and contrasted this to the general reality of marginalization and exclusion from the job market on low benefits which results from the current structure of income support programs combined with the lack of appropriate supports and services for individuals (OECD 2003). For the OECD, best practise would involve providing both income supplements and individualized supports to people with disabilities who choose to work. While Canada does provide some tax credits to workers with disabilities, these are very modest and often only cover, at best, additional costs of working and living. By contrast with other countries, both disability income supports and investments in home, community, and workplace supports are very low.

Even when they find jobs, persons with disabilities are significantly less likely to work full-time for the full year than other workers, and have lower hourly wages. Research by the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) shows that the median hourly wage of male workers with disabilities is about 95% of the median wage of workers without a disability, while women with a disability earn just 86% per hour as much as other women (CCSD 2002). As a result, of both time worked and lower hourly wages, annual earnings of workers with disabilities are much lower than for the rest of the population.

This pay gap partly reflects lower levels of education. Less than one-half of persons with disabilities aged 25 to 54 (46%) have completed some kind of post-secondary education compared to 57% of people of the same age without disabilities. This partly reflects barriers to education for children and youth with disabilities. However, workers with disabilities are also older and more experienced, and those who surmount barriers to gain jobs might be expected to be paid better than average. A number of submissions to the recent federal government Pay Equity

Commission found evidence of discrimination in pay after controlling for differences between workers with and without disabilities, and argued that persons with disabilities should be covered by pay equity laws. Lower wages may reflect employer preconceptions about the capacity of workers with disabilities to perform at higher levels, and it is striking that relatively few workers with disabilities are in professional, supervisory, and management positions.

Conclusions

Exclusion from the workplace and lack of proper accommodation within the workplace are both major problems for Canadians with disabilities. The major solutions include changes to income support programs to remove the Catch-22 choice which too often has to be made between low benefits and working in a poverty wage job, employer and government support for accommodations, and supports and services in the workplace as well as in the home and the community.

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