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Career Advancement Pathways for Workers with Disabilities

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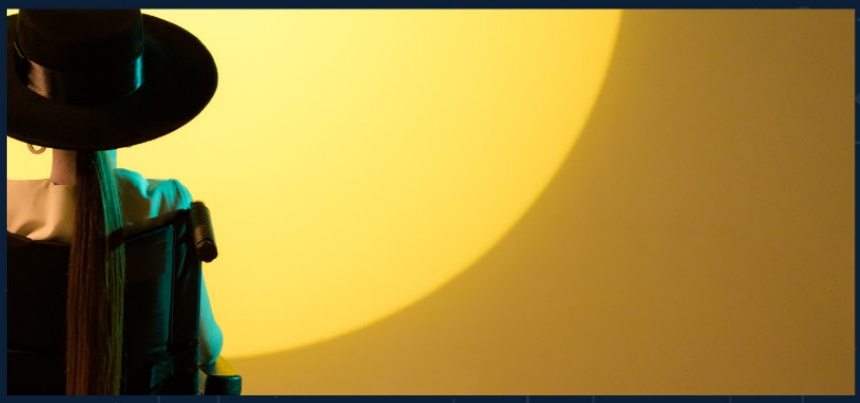

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Research, policy, and practice aimed at labour market inclusivity is often focused on creating equitable access to job opportunities. Certainly, achieving employment equity in Canada requires removing barriers that prevent people with disabilities from obtaining and retaining work. However, underrepresentation in the labour market manifests in many ways beyond employment rates.

Access to high-quality work is a well-understood social determinant of health.[1] Employment is also a strong predictor of psychological well-being,[2] and there is overwhelming evidence for a reciprocal, enduring relationship between self-esteem and work.[3] At its best, work can also be an avenue for self-fulfillment, personal growth, and the chance to make a difference in the world.

True employment equity means ensuring workers with disabilities have access to high-quality work and pathways to develop their careers. Currently, workers with disabilities face not only lower employment rates, but inequitable access to advancement opportunities and to roles that utilize their full potential.

This article explores why **career advancement** is a crucial and often overlooked element of inclusive employment. We will explore how addressing these disparities involves not only creating fair opportunities for upward mobility, but also expanding how we understand career advancement. We will also discuss persistent barriers to career advancement and meaningful work faced by workers with disabilities through a review of recent research and real examples. Finally, we illustrate promising practices and initiatives underway for promoting inclusive career advancement.

What is Career Advancement?

Career advancement means different things to different people.[4] Although typically associated with upward mobility, like promotion,[5,6] advancement can also be achieved through job change, increased decision-making power, more benefits, new responsibilities, and greater autonomy. The pursuit of career advancement, in many ways, reflects a desire for work that goes beyond meeting basic needs. It illustrates the motivation to learn new skills, connect with others, and make an impact on the world. Career advancement is therefore closely linked to the concept of **meaningful work.**

Meaningfulness refers to the extent to which workers see their work as valuable and worthwhile.[7] Most researchers define meaningful work as work that is (a) significant or contributing to a broader purpose, (b) a fit with the worker's skills and goals, (c) personally fulfilling, and/or (d) a combination of these and sometimes other criteria.[8]

Meaningful work has numerous benefits for employees and employers. It improves life satisfaction, job satisfaction, and subjective wellbeing.[9,10] It also promotes organizational commitment and reduces turnover intentions.[9,10,11] Recent research on persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities has shown that meaningful work fosters a sense of pride, develops independence, and offers purpose in life.[12] In short, those who find their jobs meaningful are happier, more fulfilled, and more engaged with their work.

Whether work feels meaningful is determined by individual-, societal-, job-, and organizational-level factors.[7] Access to safe work is a societal factor, as are cultural norms influencing perceptions of power and material success.[7] Individuals with personality traits like extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness are more likely to find their work meaningful, and other individual factors include motivational factors like competence, relatedness, autonomy, and power; personal values; and life-story narratives.[7]

Organizational factors like respect, trust, inclusivity, cooperation, corporate social responsibility practices, a focus on continuous learning, and HR practices that foster staff participation are linked to meaningfulness across all levels of a workplace.[7] Job-level factors include autonomy, quality of social networks, connection in the workplace, stability, fair compensation, and the opportunity to use different skills at work.[7] Many of these job factors, especially autonomy, stability, and compensation, tend to increase with seniority. Advancement within an organization can therefore be a direct pathway to more fulfilling work. However, career advancement is not limited to moving up the organizational hierarchy.

Reimagining Career Advancement

Career advancement is traditionally thought of as 'moving up' by obtaining increasingly senior roles in an organizational hierarchy or over the course of one's career journey. From this perspective, advancement looks like a staircase or a **ladder.**

Many people *do* want more seniority in their roles and all the advantages that come with it – like increased responsibility, higher pay, and more autonomy. People with disabilities are still underrepresented in professional, scientific, and technical industries and management and executive positions,[13,14] and more likely to work part-time than workers without disabilities.[15] There is plenty of work to be done to promote upward career mobility for workers with disabilities.

However, the idea that career advancement is like moving up a ladder assumes a linear, upward trajectory is the only pathway to success and meaningful work. For some, career advancement might mean learning new skills, taking on different responsibilities, entering a new field, or starting a business. Career advancement, in other words, can look like building **bridges** across positions, organizations, and fields, rather than climbing up a ladder. Career bridges offer an alternative metaphor for career progress by not defining it solely in hierarchical terms.

Career ladders

Traditional career advancement involves climbing the ranks of an organization or field.

Career bridges

Advancement is lateral, in which increased tasks, responsibilities or number of hours worked are assigned within the same role. Or, workers can make a move to a new field or career path.

Expanding our definitions of career advancement to include lateral moves, career changes, and non-traditional paths like entrepreneurship also allows us to see a wider range of possibilities for fostering meaningful, high-quality work. However, barriers to different forms of career advancement persist at attitudinal, social, and structural levels.

Career Advancement Challenges for Workers with Disabilities

According to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, more than **30%** of persons with disabilities have reported being at a disadvantage in their careers due to disability-related barriers.[16]

Recent research from the Institute for Work and Health has shown that workers with disabilities are less likely to report positive employment characteristics like flexibility and safety, and more likely to work in temporary, part-time, and gig employment; experience job and income insecurity; work in roles that don't match or fully utilize their skills; face 'job lock', or the inability to leave a role due to the ensuing loss of employee benefits; and experience wage theft.[17] Workers with disabilities therefore face challenges accessing high-quality, meaningful work; experience barriers moving their careers upwards or laterally; and frequently must navigate the precarious landscape of underemployment and non-standard work arrangements.

Accessing High-Quality and Meaningful Work

Persons with disabilities continue to report lower employment quality than their counterparts without disabilities.[17,18] Barriers including stigma, talent mismatch, and other challenges prevent workers with disabilities from flourishing in their roles or developing their careers.

Talent Underutilization

A key component of meaningful work is feeling like one's role suits their unique skills and abilities.[8] Workers with disabilities are more likely than their peers to be underutilized in their roles, or to work in roles that don't suit their training, education, and experience. According to a 2023 Job Talks Access report, employees with disabilities are nearly twice as likely to be in roles with low autonomy and low job satisfaction, often doing entry-level work, and unable to see how their roles contribute to the organization's mission.[18] In such roles, seniority isn't always the growth opportunity it seems. Even after advancing in the organizational hierarchy, workers with disabilities frequently felt underutilized and disillusioned.

Skill mismatch occurs when an employee's competencies don't align with the requirements and expectations of the position.[19] While this can sometimes take the form of underskilling – lacking the necessary skills for the role – people with disabilities are also more likely to experience overskilling, or having skills beyond job requirements.[20] Negative stereotypes and assumptions can cause employers to underestimate the qualifications and capabilities of job applicants with disabilities,[20] which can lead to hiring decisions that don't align with candidates' actual skill sets. Skill mismatch can also result from having fewer opportunities to develop skills or access training. The consequences of skill mismatch can be lower job satisfaction and reduced earnings for workers,[20] as well as productivity loss for workers and businesses.[21]

Another career advancement barrier for persons with disabilities is simply that their unique perspectives and strengths often go unrecognized. As they must navigate a world that is not designed for them, many people with disabilities learn early on how to devise creative solutions to overcome challenges. Many people with disabilities demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of adversity, manifesting in a strong work ethic, determination to succeed, and ability to persevere through difficulties. [22,23] Further, navigating inaccessibility can contribute to the development of unique perspectives that drive innovation and improvement in products or services. Despite this, nearly half of respondents in a survey said that their market-worthy ideas were ignored by the people with the power to act on them.[24]

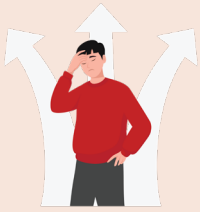
Tokenism

Tokenism, or the practice of hiring a person with a disability to give the superficial appearance of fair treatment, [25] is detrimental to belonging and inclusion and damages efforts to foster meaningful work. Tokenism can manifest in several subtle but harmful ways. First, it can create a false sense of inclusion by creating an appearance of diversity without addressing underlying barriers. For example, employees with disabilities may be included in meetings and events but not given any real decision-making power or influence.[26]

Second, tokenism allows organizations to approach inclusion from a quota mindset, declaring diversity goals achieved through the act of hiring workers with disabilities, while substantive barriers to inclusion and accessibility go unaddressed in policy, practice, and workplace culture.[26] Token representation can also perpetuate ableism if the employee is seen as an exception rather than the norm, reinforcing stereotypes; or it can lead to unfounded generalizations about all people with disabilities.[25] In sum, tokenism weakens efforts to promote understanding of the diverse experiences and capabilities of people with disabilities, and can indirectly undermine career advancement.

Glass ceilings are invisible barriers that prevent upward mobility in organizations,[6] like limited access to professional development opportunities, or discrimination in promotion decisions. Similarly, **glass cliffs** refer to high-risk leadership positions often disproportionately given to members of equity-deserving groups.[27] These positions are 'ledges' from which a leader with disabilities may fall. **Glass partitions** describe the invisible 'walls' which can trap workers with disabilities in their current positions; for example, by being dependent on health coverage or support arrangements in a particular role or organization (i.e., job lock). [28]

Career plateaus occur when an individual reaches a level in their professional life where they feel stuck.[29] Individuals may stop learning new skills or growing existing ones. As industries evolve, those on a career plateau may fall behind on the knowledge and skills required to remain competitive.[30] This can make it difficult to qualify for more advanced positions or adapt to industry changes. Workers with disabilities are often overlooked for progression and upskilling opportunities, increasing the likelihood of experiencing career plateaus.



Barriers to Career Mobility

Job Lock

Job lock is the inability to leave a job due to a reliance on continued access to income or benefits, particularly medical benefits.[31] It is a structural, systemic barrier to career advancement for persons with disabilities.

Job lock is associated with lower life satisfaction and reduced motivation, and can negatively impact wellbeing and career growth.[31] The risks of losing access to healthcare can outweigh a worker's desire to change jobs, trapping them in low-quality or unsatisfying roles, delaying their retirement, or disincentivizing plans to start a business.[32] For example, workers with medical conditions that require expensive prescription medication and frequent specialist appointments may be reluctant to pursue opportunities, like new jobs or entrepreneurship pathways, that offer basic (or no) extended health benefits – even if these roles present career development opportunities. Job lock is thus a detriment to workers' quality of life and employment satisfaction, and to broader innovation and economic growth.

In countries like the United States, where employer health insurance is the predominant way of accessing healthcare, job lock is a major concern for labour market mobility and career development.[33] In Canada, job lock is comparatively less prevalent, but many Canadians with disabilities do rely on employer benefits like vision care, prescription medication, and access to workplace wellness programs or health spending accounts, and remain in stable but less-than-ideal roles to retain coverage. Very few workers in precarious roles or gig work have access to extended health benefits. A portable benefits strategy is one potential solution that could provide healthcare access to gig economy workers and others who fall outside of employer-sponsored healthcare plans, and potentially mitigate job lock.[34] The province of Ontario has communicated their intent to develop this strategy and has convened a Portable Benefits Advisory Panel – a first across Canada.[35]

Stigma

Stigma refers to negative beliefs or stereotypes about individuals whose characteristics are seen as different from, or less than, what society considers normal.[36,37] Stigma in the form of ableism continues to be a barrier to employment and career advancement for persons with disabilities.[36]

Stigma is often embedded in organizational culture and sociocultural norms. For example, organizational-level barriers can appear as inaccessible hiring practices; tokenism; an absence of effective role models, mentors, and sponsors; and difficulties accessing needed accommodations. At the societal level, persistent barriers include insufficient access to education and career development opportunities, and the perpetuation of myths and misconceptions that negatively influence norms and expectations, like the long-debunked belief that people with disabilities are unmotivated to work.[38]

Intersecting experiences of marginalization can lead to 'compounding stigma' for diverse workers with disabilities. Little research exists examining specific intersections of disability with race, gender, and other social identities as they relate to career advancement. However, findings from a US study on the career development of 17 highly-achieving women with physical and sensory disabilities, who were diverse across various dimensions such as race, sexual orientation, disability type, and age, showed that race and gender interacted with experiences of disability to impede women's access to the workforce.[39] In India, researchers have seen that women with disabilities are stereotyped as incompetent compared to their male peers with disabilities.[40] In the UK, research has shown that workers with disabilities in high-seniority roles are more likely to be men. [41]

Discrimination of persons with disabilities can manifest in covert ways. Examples of covert discrimination might include overlooking workers with disabilities for professional development opportunities like training programs or conferences; failing to proactively offer reasonable accommodations that could boost productivity; allowing disability stereotypes to influence performance reviews negatively; or passing over qualified workers with disabilities for promotions.[42] Stereotypes that undermine the skill and capabilities of workers with disabilities can also impact how managers delegate challenging assignments that could help build skills or increase organizational visibility. For example, managers may hesitate to assign "stretch assignments": projects that are beyond the worker's current skill level and which can serve as career development opportunities.[42]

Precarity and the Challenges of Non-Standard Employment

More than half of workers are in roles with one or more indicators of insecurity or **precarity.**[43] More Canadians with disabilities are involved in precarious work, especially older adults and new workers with disabilities, compared to their counterparts without disabilities.[44]

'Non-standard' employment – jobs outside the conventional model of full-time, permanent employment on which traditional labour laws are based – is on the rise.[45] The increase in non-standard employment and precarious work, driven by factors like globalization, economic instability, technological advances, and the 'on-demand economy', is reshaping the labour landscape for workers with disabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting impact on non-standard work and the gig economy by exacerbating existing inequities for workers with disabilities – particularly those at the intersections of race, gender, and immigration status – who were, and are, disproportionately represented in food service, delivery, hospitality, and other public-facing 'essential jobs'.[46]

Workers with disabilities earn less income, and are more likely to work part-time (<30 hours/week) and have short-term contracts.[17] Precarious work is inherently impermanent and unpredictable; workers may find themselves without employment on little notice and without recourse. Workers in precarious jobs also have fewer regulatory protections, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and poor working conditions.[17] These workers are more likely to work in high-intensity roles, increasing their risk of burnout; have access to less personal time off; have fewer opportunities to provide input at work; receive less support; and face a greater risk of workplace harassment.[47]

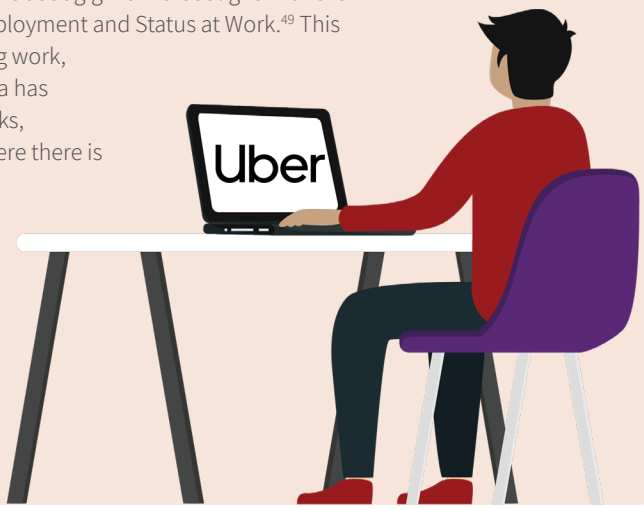
Gig work is one form of precarious employment. For some workers with disabilities, gig work is a last resort, undertaken due to obstacles in accessing or maintaining employment in the traditional job market.[48] Canadians with disabilities are 1.5 times more likely than those without disabilities to work in the gig economy.[17]

Spotlight on Gig Work

Everyone seems to agree that **gig work** is growing, yet the term has been inconsistently defined by policymakers, businesses, and researchers. [49]

Gig work usually involves the provision of services on a project or contract basis. It is almost always associated with precarity, low pay, and a lack of worker protections, and often refers to work mediated by digital channels on an 'on-demand' basis (e.g., Uber, DoorDash, TaskRabbit).

Statistics Canada is creating a framework to define and collect data about gig work that aligns with the International Labour Organization's Classifications of Status in Employment and Status at Work.[49] This development will be significant for understanding the impact of gig work, especially on workers with disabilities. As of 2024, Statistics Canada has defined gig work as "paid work done on the basis of short-term tasks, projects, or jobs, which does not guarantee ongoing work, and where there is a need for the worker to play an active role in obtaining their next task, job or client."[50] Crucially, gig work can be understood as a type of 'dependent self-employment' – a concept which reflects the ways the worker is dependent on a business for most or all their work and has a limited ability to control their work model or to make business decisions. This relative lack of autonomy is one quality that differentiates dependent from independent self-employed workers (e.g., small business



Non-standard and precarious employment are barriers to the career development of workers with (and without) disabilities in several ways. Workers in most non-standard roles are not afforded the typical terms, privileges, and benefits associated with traditional employee status (e.g., adequate wages, health insurance, retirement plans, job security, training and professional development opportunities, access to unionization and employment insurance, social support networks).[17,48,51] They are also not always protected by government employment regulations, including fairness and equality, safety protections, personal, medical and/or family leave practices, workplace accommodations, and labour agreements. Lack of regulation means that many companies operating in the gig economy can neglect the duty to accommodate without consequence, or even enforce punitive policies, such as requiring workers with disabilities to obtain different, more costly accident insurance.[51]

The burden of administrative duties such as mileage tracking, insurance maintenance, and reporting taxes is high. Workers classified as 'self-employed or contract workers are responsible for paying their own income taxes, necessitating a strong grasp of financial literacy, or the financial resources to outsource this responsibility.[51] Additionally, there are extra costs associated with maintaining or upgrading equipment like vehicles and computers, which adds financial strain. Social assistance benefits can be jeopardized when workers with disabilities approach or exceed income thresholds, creating a disincentive to increase their work hours. All these factors can result in workers with disabilities feeling trapped in a cycle of unstable work and financial precarity.

To effectively address the drawbacks of non-standard, precarious employment for workers with disabilities, a better understanding of non-standard employment and its impact is needed, and policymakers must take decisive action. Policy officials and the government must consider how to strengthen regulatory frameworks and clarify definitions of employment to include non-standard employment models, ensuring self-employed and contract workers receive the same rights as traditional employees.[52] For example, enforcing greater transparency for businesses operating in the gig economy, and expanding gig workers' capacity to participate in collective bargaining and resolve labour disputes, are potential mechanisms for improving precarious conditions and promoting career advancement.

Facilitators of Career Advancement

There are a growing number of promising practices and initiatives to promote access to high-quality career development pathways. These range from legislative changes and cultural shifts, to grassroots initiatives and emerging practices, to career management strategies for workers with disabilities.

Research by Samosh (2020) proposes three pillars—represented by the metaphor of a **three-legged stool**—that support the career advancement of persons with disabilities in leadership positions[53]:

1. **Career self-management strategies**

   This includes personal attributes and proactive behaviours, such as setting goals, seeking opportunities for skill development, and leveraging personal strengths.

2. **Social networks**

   This pillar emphasizes the importance of external networks, including family, friends, acquaintances, and role models.

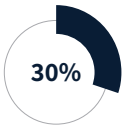
3. **Organizational and societal factors**

   This includes workplace policies, practices, and cultures that support inclusivity and accessibility, as well as broader societal supports like disability legislation and economic policies that reduce barriers to advancement.

This section explores promising practices that are shaping the future of career advancement for workers with disabilities. From transformative organizational policies and individual career management strategies to the impact of inclusive leadership and the strategic use of assistive technologies, we showcase how these facilitators are collectively promoting a more equitable and inclusive professional landscape.

Promoting Career Advancement through Structural Change

Disability rights legislation and policy levers are instrumental in facilitating career advancement for workers with disabilities by fostering greater accessibility and reducing discrimination. Policies that require employers to assess and measure underrepresentation gaps, for example, aim to boost employment opportunities and outcomes for underrepresented groups based on sociodemographic criteria. When coupled with good-faith efforts towards workplace inclusion, these policies can help address structural discrimination by setting concrete, measurable targets commensurate with labour market availability. [54]



While not a policy, the 50-30 Challenge initiative by the Government of Canada challenges Canadian organizations to increase the representation and inclusion of diverse groups, including persons with disabilities, on Canadian boards and senior management, with a minimum of **30%** hired and/or promoted to leadership positions.[55]

Importantly, hiring quotas alone are unlikely to remove barriers to career advancement for persons with disabilities, and unintended consequences, such as tokenism, may occur from the use of quota systems without a culture of workplace inclusion and disability confidence.[56]

Policy interventions alone are not sufficient to remove the barriers that inhibit the career advancement of persons with disabilities; other drivers, at both the organizational- and individual-level, also play an important role.

Spotlight: Paralympians to Earn Equal Financial Rewards as Olympic Counterparts for First Time in Canadian History

Paralympic athletes historically earn very little to no financial rewards for their career success since the first Paralympic games began in 1960.[57] This is in stark contrast to the financial incentives offered to their Olympic counterparts.

In Paris 2024, Canadian gold medalists earned $20,000, Silver medalists earned $15,000, and Bronze medalists earned $10,000.[58] The 2024 Paris Games marked the first time in Canadian history in which Paralympians earned the same rewards. Canadian entrepreneur Sanjay Malaviya is the leading force behind this shift for Paralympian equity, which he pursued in 2022 by giving $5,000 to 130 Olympians and 53 Paralympians for winning medals at the Tokyo and Beijing Games. In support, the Paralympic Foundation of Canada has set forth an initial $8-million endowment to ensure Canadian Paralympians of the future have the same incentives and chances at financial success as their Olympic counterparts.[59]

> *A Paralympic medal is worth the same as an Olympic medal. And that message to our Paralympians, to kids with disabilities all across Canada, is what matters.*
>
> ***– Canadian Paralympian Chantal Petitclerc***

Facilitators in the Workplace

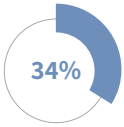
Disability Confident Leadership

Employers, HR professionals, and supervisors can be role models, mentors, and facilitators, both directly and indirectly promoting equitable career growth opportunities for workers with disabilities.

Direct supervisors and managers of workers with disabilities can have a significant impact on the career development of their employees.[60] Supportive supervisors can foster success by assigning workers with disabilities to high-visibility projects and challenging assignments that raise their profile within the company and across their careers, and providing them with the necessary support, tools, and resources to ensure they have an equitable opportunity to succeed.

Leadership can promote career advancement opportunities by setting the tone for culture and climate in the workplace. Leaders who are **disability confident—** that is, leaders who recognize the value that people with disabilities bring to their organizations, and who have the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to support persons with disabilities in the workplace—can create accessible environments and inclusive workplace culture.[61] Effective and accessible communication from workplace leadership ensures employees can envision a career path within the organization.[62] Leaders who transparently and authentically communicate their organization's commitment to accessibility and inclusion can also help to reduce stigma, and combat unfounded concerns that accommodations and diversity initiatives lead to preferential treatment of employees with disabilities.[63]

Disability representation at the highest levels in an organization plays a key role in creating a more disability inclusive culture in the workplace. Leaders with disabilities can provide support through mentorship, facilitating access to networks, and sharing knowledge. Leaders with disabilities in organizations are also well-positioned to advocate for the inclusion of other persons with disabilities and normalize the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace.[64] When leaders share their disabilities openly in the workplace, they promote a culture of inclusion.



The National Organization on Disability found that companies with executives who disclose a disability have **34%** higher rates of disability disclosure among their staff.[65]

Disability Inclusion Training

Spotlight on Disability Confidence

CCRW's Disability Confidence Toolkit provides a dedicated section on career advancement for inclusive employers. Intended for use by managers, Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Accessibility specialists, and HR professionals, the Career Development tool helps businesses understand career development and helps people leaders learn how to have career conversations with, determine advancement opportunities for, and empower the career development of workers with disabilities. Both organizational and worker perspectives are considered in this resource, which was created through an advisory group of community organizations. The focus of the Disability Confidence Toolkit is to support businesses on their journey of accessibility.

Workplace training initiatives are another powerful facilitator for career advancement by reducing disability stigma in the workplace.[53,63] Disability inclusion training can debunk misconceptions, illustrate common workplace barriers and the effects of bias, educate staff about the diverse range of disability experiences and the value of assistive technologies and accommodations, and improve disability confidence.

Disability inclusion training should be offered company-wide, including to leadership. Leaders who engage in training will be more prepared to broaden perspectives about disability across the company and may better appreciate the individual strengths of workers with disabilities.[61]

Employees with disabilities can also benefit from disability inclusion training across the organization. When employers and staff learn about disability, workers with disabilities spend less time and energy self-advocating and educating their colleagues and managers on accessibility and accommodations.[63] Employees with disabilities may also learn self-advocacy tools about confronting discrimination and building confidence. Beyond disability-related training, training designed to up- or re-skill employees with disabilities can further support career growth.[66]

Supporting Disclosure and Access to Accommodations

Workers who seek access to accommodations must often navigate the complex decision of disability disclosure, risking negative impacts such as discrimination and hostility from coworkers.[67] The possibility of losing accommodations can stop employees with disabilities from seeking new positions and better opportunities – a form of job lock.

Employers can improve disclosure processes for employees with disabilities by identifying and removing barriers to disclosure within their organization (e.g., addressing the organization's culture, policies, and the perceived supportiveness of colleagues and supervisors),[67] demedicalizing the accommodations process, ensuring access to accommodations across the worker's entire employment lifecycle, and implementing occupational assessments across the organization to ensure all employees receive support.[60]

One way to improve the accommodations process is to implement **accommodations passports.**[60] These are tools for employers to document and communicate the specific requested supports required by each employee. Removing the need to disclose again when moving upwards or laterally within an organization, ensuring consistency of accommodations, and streamlining the process of making requests are a few ways that this tool can benefit workplaces.

Taking Control of Career Development

Networks & Mentorship

Social and professional networks are important facilitators of career advancement. Internal networks, or networks within the workplace, provide access to the instrumental, informational, and emotional support necessary to succeed in the workplace, while external networks outside of the workplace can support access to new roles and other development opportunities.[53] Mentors are typically more experienced professionals in similar fields or within the same workplaces who provide advice, information, and encouragement. Mentors can support career advancement by providing access to new contacts, direction and guidance, and by offering an insider perspective on their industry or role.

Every individual's network differs in size, closeness, and the number and types of contacts, so both the quality and 'returns' of these networks can vary.[68] Research has shown that lack of access to professional networks is a barrier to obtaining promotion for persons with disabilities.[69] People with disabilities and other members of equity-deserving groups are not always afforded the same opportunities to build networks. Employers can support their workers with disabilities by connecting them with professional contacts, mentors, or setting up disability resource groups and disability networks.

Inclusive managers and mentors play an important role in career advancement for workers with disabilities. A 2020 study conducted by MentorCanada showed that of the 2,838 youth with disabilities surveyed, those who were mentored were more likely to report positive employment outcomes compared to youth with disabilities who did not have a mentor (89% to 75%).[70] Alongside improved employment outcomes, mentorship improves self-determination skills, awareness of workplace supports, and social skills.[71] Mentoring may also increase efficacy in making career-related decisions and knowledge about different career options.[72]

Companies that want to support career advancement for their employees with disabilities should consider setting up or facilitating disability networks. A study by Kulkarni et al. (2014) showed that disability networks positively impact the career development of workers with disabilities.[40] When people with disabilities join a network comprised of other workers with disabilities, they gain access to mentors at work, or even become role models for others with disabilities.[53] Formal mentoring programs for persons with disabilities, or disability-specific employee resource groups, can also improve the likelihood of employees with disabilities attaining promotion in their jobs.[65]

Career Management Strategies

Career management is a lifelong process of career planning and decision-making[73] in which workers consider their talents, interests, values, and lifestyle preferences, and determine what jobs, companies, and industries are a good fit for them. Based on this information, they set career goals and build a plan to achieve them. Sometimes the plans work, while other times they don't; either way, workers get feedback that can help them adjust their plan.[74] Career management provides a structured way of navigating a complex and unpredictable work world.[73]

Career management begins early in life. Early work and volunteer experiences can have positive impacts on the employment outcomes of youths with disabilities. Early work experience substantially improves the likelihood that youths and young adults will obtain employment in adulthood,[75] especially if they found their job independently.[76] Volunteer work similarly encourages the discovery of one's abilities, the development of employment skills, and helps inform career interests[77] -- crucial elements to successful career management activities. This underscores the need to ensure young people with disabilities have equitable access to early work experiences.

Proactive career management strategies for all workers include skill-building, networking, and mentorship, as we've discussed. They also include **setting clear goals** by defining qualities like specific job titles, skillsets, or desired industries; **maintaining a positive mindset** by persisting through career obstacles, and focusing on goals rather than hurdles; and even **engaging in disability advocacy** by raising awareness about disability in the workplace and helping to formulate disability-friendly policies.[78] Employment coaches can play a vital role in supporting career management by assisting with goal setting, working with jobseekers and workers with disabilities to identify their skills and growth areas, finding job openings in fields of interest, and sharing knowledge about workplace accommodations relevant to their clients.

Workers with disabilities face unique challenges in career management as a result of systemic barriers and discrimination. Some workers with disabilities adopt career management strategies that may appear to others as self-limiting, such as opting for non-traditional career pathways or choosing not to pursue opportunities for upwards mobility.[27] However, as we have discussed, a more holistic view shows that career advancement can take many forms. The most important indicator of successful career advancement is that workers find their careers rewarding and meaningful.

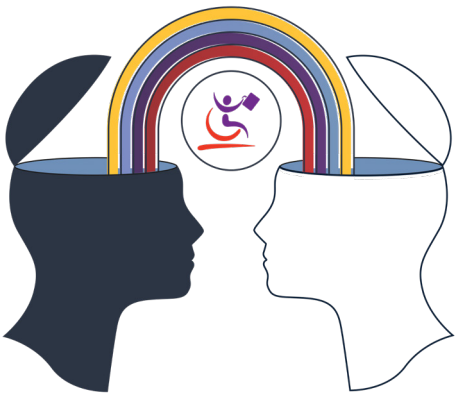
Entrepreneurship, Freelancing, and Independent Contracting

Despite the inherent risks and challenges of non-standard work, opportunities in entrepreneurship, freelancing, and independent contracting can be rewarding career pathways for many people with disabilities.

Autonomy is a component of job satisfaction, and it is a recognized benefit of entrepreneurship for persons with disabilities.[79,80,81] The flexibility afforded by contract jobs and gig work, which are increasingly prevalent in today's economy, can also allow some workers with disabilities to exercise greater autonomy over their work-life balance and find roles that match their unique skills and talents.

In non-standard employment, workers often have more freedom to customize their schedules, number of work hours, locations, job tasks, and work conditions.[48] In other words, they have the flexibility to implement their own workplace modifications to meet disability-related needs and family obligations, without having to navigate the workplace accommodations process.[51] They can utilize their own assistive or adaptive technology and preexisting support systems (e.g., families, friends, significant others) to accommodate their needs. Without a traditional employer, disability disclosure is less relevant, allowing workers with disabilities to avoid medicalized processes and bureaucratic barriers, as well as potential discrimination from colleagues and employers.[51]

Some digital platforms such as Upwork and Rover enable workers to set their own rates, helping ensure they receive equitable wages. Various forms of contract work can be lucrative for people with disabilities, especially those who have stable housing as well as a primary source of income or financial support from a member of their household.[48] When freelance or contract work serves as a secondary source of income, it can also provide valuable experience and training, promoting employability and greater independence.



A Final Note on Inclusive Career Advancement

Career advancement for persons with disabilities is not one-size-fits-all. Pathways to career growth can include upward mobility, lateral moves, skill development, and non-traditional career pathways like entrepreneurship and freelancing.

The employment barriers faced by workers with disabilities are complex and persistent, arising from stigma and systemic inaccessibility. However, by removing the barriers workers with disabilities face to accessing high-quality, rewarding jobs that fully utilize their skills and make the most of their talents, the potential benefits for workers with disabilities, the workforce, and Canada are immense. These benefits include increased innovation and productivity, economic growth, a more diverse workforce, and better quality of life. Through fostering inclusive workplaces, implementing effective accessibility policy, and empowering workers with disabilities to take charge of their careers through career management strategies, mentorship, and employment coaching, this potential can be harnessed. By addressing the barriers and leveraging the facilitators of career advancement, we can create a more inclusive and equitable labour market where everyone has the freedom to realize their full potential.

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