

Trends Report 2024
SHAPING TOMORROW



Awareness to action:
How employers can embrace
disability inclusion in the workplace

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The impacts of employment services, coaching, training, and upskilling on employment success for jobseekers with disabilities are widely recognized. Employment coaching and one-on-one job search assistance services provide practical support applying to jobs, preparing for interviews, and finding relevant opportunities. Training and upskilling programs help workers grow their skillsets and become more competitive applicants. These services are indispensable in helping jobseekers build the tools and the confidence needed to enter the workforce, and many such initiatives and programs designed for jobseekers with disabilities exist across Canada. Often, however, these supports focus only on one half of the equation. Most interventions aimed at improving employment rates for people with disabilities focus on the talent pool: jobseekers and workers.¹ The overlooked other half of the equation is employers.

Employers are ultimately the gatekeepers of employment and career advancement. The attitudes employers hold about disability, and the hiring behaviours they choose, directly impact the labour market participation opportunities available to people with disabilities.² Achieving full equity and inclusion in the workforce requires shifting employers' perspectives on disability inclusion and helping them recognize the advantages of accessibility.

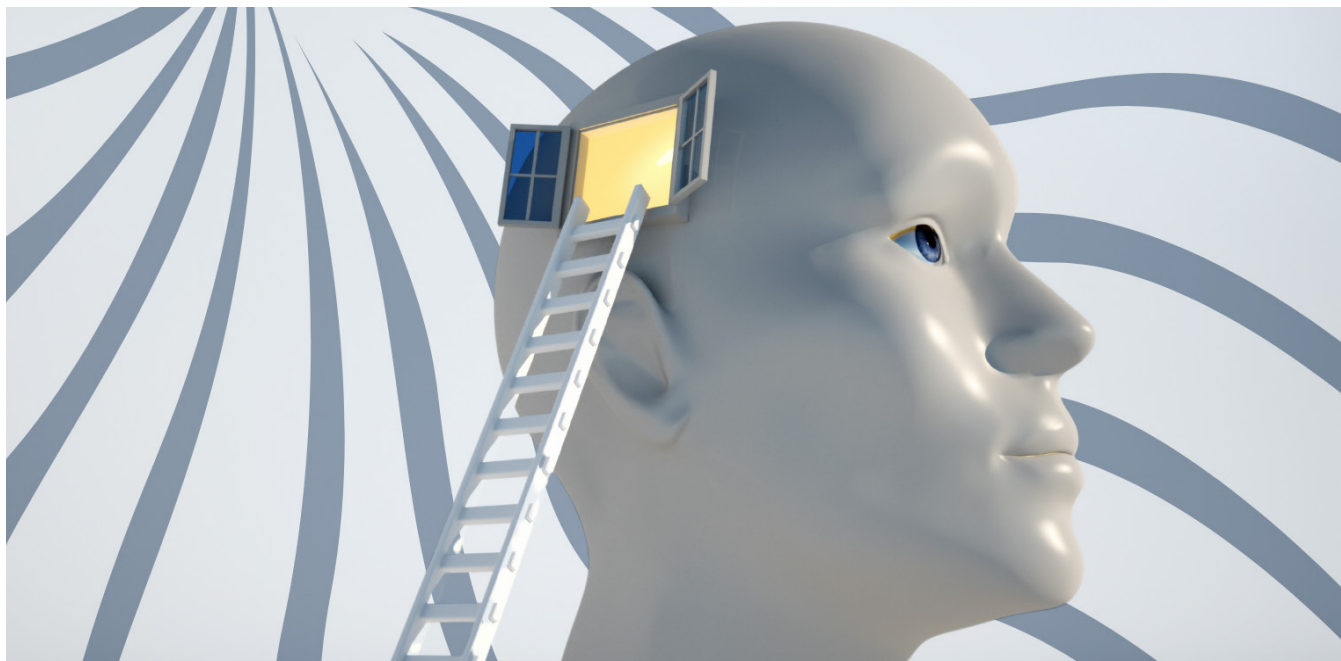
In this article, we explore how employer attitudes shape the employment landscape for jobseekers and workers with disabilities. We highlight evidence that dismantles two of the most common misconceptions employers hold about workers with disabilities, discuss the reasons for the intention-action gap in hiring behaviour, and showcase strategies and interventions to build employers' motivation and capacity for inclusive hiring.



What are Attitudes?

Attitudes are the beliefs and evaluations we make about the world and people around us.³ They inform how we interpret our experiences of the world and impact the choices we make.

Attitudes can be conscious – that is, beliefs that we are self-aware of, like preferences for coffee over tea, or whether you enjoyed a movie.^{4,5} They can also be subconscious, which means people are not necessarily aware they hold them, nor are they always directly observable.^{4,6} Sometimes, these attitudes are more like abstract hunches than concrete, well thought-out positions. These subconscious attitudes can nonetheless influence our behaviour in numerous ways. Understanding attitudes allows us to examine underlying factors that may be influencing decision making, including about employment and career advancement decisions.



Attitudes are formed, often passively, over the course of our lives from our direct experiences and cultural influences.⁷ Our attitudes can influence the judgments and decisions we make, especially ones we make quickly. To save energy, people frequently take shortcuts, relying on readily available information instead of rigorous decision-making.⁸ This information can include what was learned through experience, study, media exposure, or observing others, and may also include misinformation and misconceptions.^{8,9}

Taken together, this means that, while we may feel we're making quick, objective judgements, unaddressed biases may influence our decision-making. One such bias is known as in-group bias, or the tendency to favour those who are similar to us.⁹ Subconscious in-group bias often manifests in discrimination directed at members of equity-deserving groups, like people with disabilities, by those who are not. For example, a hiring manager interviewing a candidate with a disability may conclude the jobseeker won't 'fit in' with the rest of their team, without realizing this snap judgment was driven by their own misconceptions of disability.

Why do Employer Attitudes Matter?

Unpacking and dismantling negative attitudes, particularly those held towards underrepresented groups in the workforce (e.g., people with disabilities, gender and sexual minorities, Indigenous Peoples, and members of visible minority groups) is critical in advancing employment equity.

Significant political and legislative strides have been made to improve employment outcomes for Canadians with disabilities. Since 1986, the Employment Equity Act has resulted in

demonstrable progress towards employment equity for workers with disabilities, as well as for women, Indigenous Canadians, and members of other racialized groups.¹⁰ Federally, the Accessible Canada Act aims for a barrier-free Canada by 2040.¹¹ Such legislation provides protection against overt discrimination and harassment, as well as gives workers avenues for recourse. Accordingly, research has found that many employers are concerned about the legal consequences for non-compliance with accessibility and inclusion legislation.¹



This progress is encouraging, but policy changes alone cannot lead to full equity and inclusion. With an estimated 741,000 unemployed Canadians with disabilities who have the potential to work, it's obvious there is more to be done.¹² As the saying goes, 'the law is a blunt instrument'; it often lacks the precision and nuance needed to address complex social issues. Laws are rigid and inflexible, and they can lead to oversimplification or unintended consequences. Smaller organizations, for example, sometimes cite concerns about legal reprisal as reasons not to hire workers with disabilities at all¹³ – though these fears are unfounded for any organization that proactively and adequately documents their equitable performance management process.¹⁴

Consider also employers' legal duty to accommodate. Per the Canadian Human Rights Act, employers must ensure workers with disabilities are not unjustly excluded from participating in the workplace, unless doing so would cause the employer undue hardship.¹⁵ The standard of evidence for claiming undue hardship is high, but employers may fail to meet their obligation by not investigating workers' reports of barriers, ignoring accommodation requests, or unfairly reprimanding or terminating employees with disabilities who seek accommodation. The legal duty to accommodate provides workers a baseline level of protection, and employers who are found to have discriminated against workers with disabilities can be found liable.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the bluntness of the legislative solution means there will inevitably be oversights and loopholes. Furthermore, organizations with fewer resources may disproportionately struggle to enact accommodation requests, meaning the bar for undue hardship varies depending on the employer's unique circumstances.

Building a culture of workplace inclusion also requires more than legal compliance. When representation benchmarks are met on paper, but without the work to foster belonging, the results aren't sustainable – a diverse workforce won't stay in an organization that doesn't welcome them. It is hard to imagine how we could ever mandate factors like psychological safety, but these qualities are crucial for creating inclusive spaces.¹⁷ Psychological safety relies greatly on interpersonal dynamics like two-way communication, active listening, and empathy that cannot be mandated, they must be fostered through means like education, training, and good leadership.

In short, what legislative solutions cannot do is change employers' deeply held attitudes and beliefs about people with disabilities. These attitudes persist as some of the primary barriers to creating an accessible, inclusive Canadian workforce.



The Intention-Action Gap

If employer attitudes are one of the most persistent barriers to employment equity, what do we make of the fact that employers frequently say they want to hire people with disabilities – but many of them still don't do it?

First, conscious and unconscious attitudes don't always align. Many of the misconceptions and stigmas that employers have about people with disabilities are held below the level of conscious awareness; they are often more like 'gut feelings' than reasoned, evidence-informed views. Employers may think they are making objective hiring decisions, but if their unconscious biases are not acknowledged, these biases may still be directly informing their preference for one candidate over another.

Second, behavioural science has shown there is a huge gap between what people say they will do and what they actually do – and employers are people, too. Psychologists have found that intentions translate into actual behaviours only about half of the time.¹⁸ Sometimes, our reasons for not following through have a lot to do with our attitudes and beliefs – but also available opportunities, resources, and supports.

The intention-action gap, also called the attitude-action gap or the say-do gap, is the failure to follow through on what we plan. The intention-action gap has been heavily studied in contexts ranging from sustainability¹⁹, exercise²⁰, and consumer behaviour²¹, and it's relevant to hiring decisions, too.

Employers do say they want to hire more inclusively. However, many fail to follow through on their commitments for a variety of reasons, some of which are attitudinal, and others that hinge on a lack of available opportunities, resources, and disability confidence.

In an evidence review of 47 studies examining the drivers of inclusive hiring behaviour, 32 factors were identified that influence hiring behaviour (either positively or negatively).¹

The most frequently identified **barriers** faced by employers were:



They expected workers with disabilities to be **unproductive**.



They thought accommodating workers with disabilities would **cost a lot of money**.



They **lacked knowledge** about accessibility and how to manage workers with disabilities.

The first two barriers relate to employers' attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and intentions towards hiring people with disabilities. They are also rooted in common **myths and misconceptions** about workers with disabilities.

Undoing Myths & Misconceptions

Fact: Workers with disabilities are not less productive.

Employers are often doubtful about what workers with disabilities can do. This pessimism is well-documented in research, but these biases are misconceptions based on little evidence. A review of employers' concerns across the employment lifecycle found beliefs that people with disabilities are unqualified, perform poorly, or are unproductive are not supported by data.¹⁴ Lack of awareness about the prevalence and diversity of disability are likely key contributors to these misconceptions.¹⁴ In other words, these negative beliefs can be rooted in a lack of awareness about how common disability is, in skepticism about the capabilities of people with disabilities, or both.

Employers frequently do not know how many qualified, competent people with disabilities are in their talent pipelines or already working for them. In either case, employers are almost certainly underestimating how many highly capable workers have disabilities but aren't disclosing them.¹⁴ In fact, disability is very common. Since over one-in-four Canadians currently lives with a disability, everyone is certain to know a person with a disability.¹² And because disability can be acquired at any point in life, many people without disabilities will acquire a disability.

Sometimes, what appears to be a lack of qualified candidates with disabilities reflects an inaccessible hiring process.¹⁴ Many disabilities are non-apparent

(‘invisible’) and are known to others only once disclosed. Workers with non-apparent disabilities who require accommodations must navigate the fraught process of deciding whether to disclose, when, and how. Many choose not to disclose their conditions in the job search or at work, fearing consequences like discrimination,²² social rejection,²³ missed advancement opportunities,²⁴ and job loss.²⁵ Unfortunately, their fears are often justified. Furthermore, stigma is often worse for those living with non-apparent disabilities than apparent disabilities. For example, individuals with non-apparent disabilities are more likely to be perceived by coworkers as faking their disability to receive favourable treatment.²⁶ Employees living with mental health disabilities are sometimes perceived as less reliable, competent, and trustworthy after disclosing.²⁷





Concerns about the capabilities of workers with disabilities often include beliefs that they are unproductive, inefficient, unreliable, or frequently absent.¹⁴ These beliefs are unfounded too. Research has found, for example, that employees with and without disabilities have similar attendance rates, as long as employers were providing an accessible workplace.²⁸ Kaletta et al. found that in 18 out of 31 organizations studied, there was no significant difference in productivity between workers with and without disabilities, and in 10 of the remaining workplaces, employees with disabilities were more productive (the opposite was true in only 3 workplaces).²⁹ While some research has found that people with disabilities are more reliable and less likely to leave their jobs, reducing turnover,^{29,30} these findings likely also reflect a lack of job mobility and career advancement opportunities available to people with disabilities, a topic we explore further in our report *Career advancement pathways* for workers with disabilities.

Statistics Canada estimates that over **741,000** people with disabilities are not employed but have the potential to work.¹²

People with disabilities want to work as much as people without disabilities, and they will gravitate towards inclusive, accessible workplaces that provide things like comprehensive health benefits, access to accommodations, and an inclusive work culture.^{14,31} Employers can benefit from undoing stigma and learning that workers with disabilities are equally productive, efficient, and reliable.



If employers do find that their employees with disabilities are unproductive, they should consider this an opportunity to evaluate how their work environment might be hindering success. Removing workplace accessibility barriers is likely to solve the problem. However, for some employers, this leads directly to the next concern: that accommodating workers with disabilities is too expensive.



Fact: Accessibility is a worthwhile investment.

Employers report that the perceived cost of workplace accessibility is a barrier to hiring workers with disabilities. It is also common for workplace accommodation requests to go unmet.³² However, investing proactively in workplace accessibility and providing individual accommodations for employees with disabilities is not only a smart business decision, but often less expensive than employers imagine.

Many employers do not have concrete knowledge about what workplace adjustments they would need, or what these would cost. Employers' concerns about the cost of accessibility are often abstract and based on a lack of information. That is, employers can't always articulate why they thought people with disabilities would be expensive to hire and manage.¹ Specific concerns tend to center on the cost of purchasing accommodations or about spending additional labour hours on supervision and training.

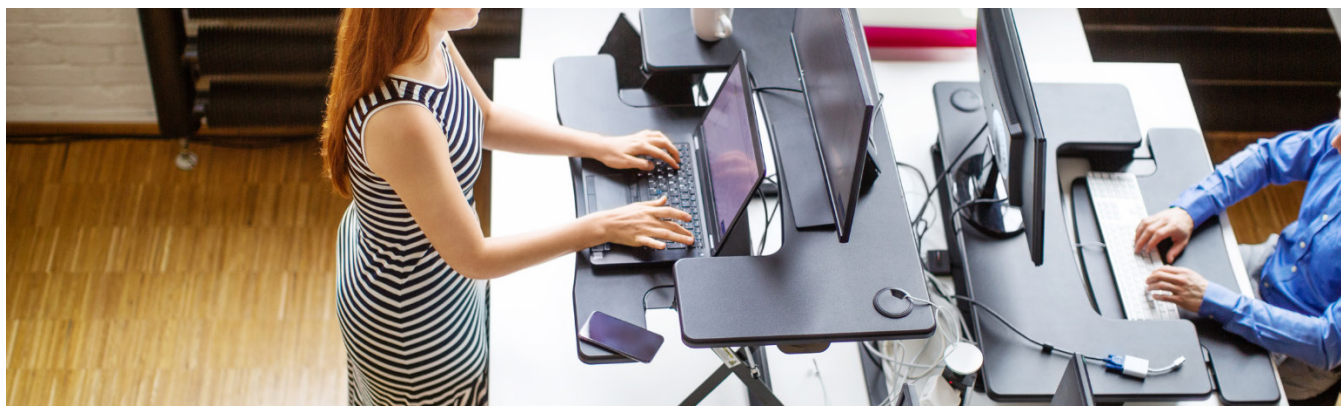
First, the notion that hiring workers with disabilities will inevitably require more time commitment from supervisors – and additional labour costs – is a misconception. As we discussed above, many employers do not realize how many workers with disabilities they already employ. This is partly because nearly two-thirds of workers with disabilities require no accommodations – paid or unpaid – at all.³³ It is also because most workplace modifications don't require intensive supervision or additional training time. Many simply require the employer's understanding and adaptability, such as allowing more frequent breaks or flexible work hours. Others involve adjusting the environment, or changing policies and practices to enhance accessibility, like enacting a scent-free workplace. According to Statistics Canada, the most common workplace accommodation needs are modified work hours, modified duties, or working from home.³² CCRW's own data also show that some of the most common workplace modifications requested include flexible schedules, additional breaks, and remote or hybrid work models.

Some accommodations do have direct costs. Because disability is diverse and accessibility needs are varied, it is difficult to predict what employers should expect to pay. It is often repeated that most accommodations are free and that the average cost of paid accommodations is a few hundred dollars. One source for this information comes from the Jobs Accommodation Network (JAN)'s ongoing research on the cost of workplace accommodations as reported by over 3000 American employers, which, as of 2023, found that 56% of accommodations had no cost, and the average cost of one-time accommodations was \$300.³⁴ In our spotlight below, we discuss the average one-time cost of individual accommodations based on CCRW's own data from the past four years of our work with

jobseekers with disabilities. Our findings largely corroborate the JAN statistic, with the one-time cost of paid accommodations averaging about \$375.



It is important to note, though, that investing proactively in large-scale improvements to workplace infrastructure or procuring ongoing supports (for example, services provided by people) can be more expensive than these statistics suggest. In JAN's research, all participating employers had contacted JAN to obtain information about workplace accommodations or disability legislation.³⁴ Many of these employers – who, by virtue of contacting JAN, are likely motivated to create disability-inclusive workplaces – may have invested in more expensive, permanent changes to their workplaces in the past, like building upgrades (e.g., door openers, ramps). This type of investment is not necessarily included in research estimating accommodation costs. The CCRW data shown below also do not include this type of investment; they reflect accommodations requested by individual jobseekers, such as assistive technologies, ergonomic workstations, or other personal equipment.

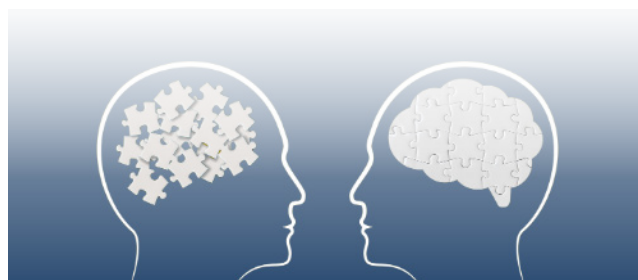


Investing in accessibility isn't always expensive, but it can be. For employers beginning their accessibility journeys from square one, there might be a more significant up-front investment involved – especially if sizable changes are needed, like infrastructure upgrades or comprehensive training for staff. And sometimes, employees with disabilities require supports on an ongoing basis to fully participate in the workplace. The cost of these accommodations may be negligible to large corporations, but substantial for small- and medium-sized organizations. Even still, the rewards of prioritizing workplace accessibility more than justify the costs.

The fact is that investing in workplace inclusion and accessibility pays dividends. For one thing, failing to provide an inclusive workplace limits an organization's potential to attract top candidates. In the competition for skilled talent, employers do themselves a disservice by excluding such a large segment of the workforce. Companies that hire inclusively are also more profitable^{35,36} – an advantage that can easily offset the costs of procuring accommodations. Providing an accessible work environment often makes an entire workplace happier and more efficient. International research has shown that the benefits of enhanced accessibility on workplace culture and employee performance translate into increased profitability.³⁷ Furthermore, disability inclusive businesses are more reflective of consumer demographics, more responsive to

customer needs, and understand that people with disabilities are a substantial market segment.^{38,39} Given over a quarter of Canadians live with a disability, it is not surprising that consumers prefer businesses that demonstrate a commitment to disability inclusion.⁴⁰

Lack of knowledge about disability can be a difficult barrier for employers to overcome. The experience of disability is diverse, and managing employees with disabilities requires more than a one-size-fits-all approach. Challenging myths and misconceptions through employer training and education, advocacy, and subsidized hiring opportunities are all useful strategies. However, building **disability confidence** begins with recognizing the worker's talent and capability rather than reducing them to their disability.⁴¹ Sometimes, employers are not lacking knowledge about disability, but the confidence and competence to manage talent that doesn't fit the 'conventional' mold. In the section on Creating Lasting Change, we discuss strategies for bolstering disability confidence and, ultimately, promoting employment equity through inclusive hiring behaviour.



CCRW Data Insights

The Real Cost Of Workplace Accommodations

This analysis of workplace accommodations draws on data from four years of CCRW Employment Services' work with jobseekers and workers with disabilities. In our service model, employment coaches work with jobseekers and workers to identify accessibility needs as well as support employers in implementing accommodations. Because CCRW assists with advocacy, procurement, and implementation of accommodations, our data includes many accommodations that in other settings might not have been requested or fully implemented.

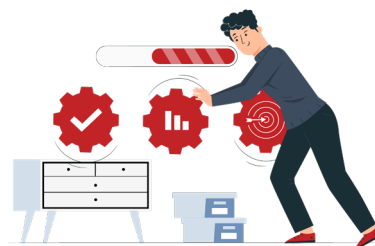
While CCRW supports jobseekers seeking many kinds of careers, a large proportion of our clients are searching for roles like sales & service and trades, transport, and equipment operator occupations. As such, the accommodation data we collect is not necessarily generalizable to all industries or occupations. For example, workers in healthcare, natural and applied sciences, management, or other professional roles may require different types of accommodations than workers in retail settings, trades occupations, or administrative occupations.



Types of accommodations

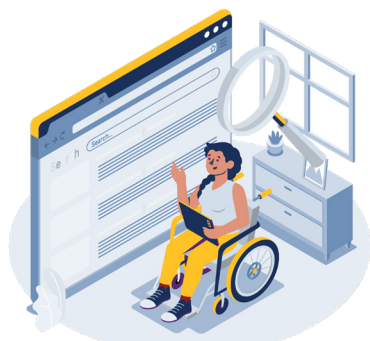
The accommodations in this data reflect one-time costs associated with individual jobseeker and employee requests. Accommodations were categorized into the following groups: Work Modifications, Ergonomic Supports, Assistive Technology (Hardware and Software), Personal Equipment, Transportation and Mobility Supports, and Human Supports.

Work modifications are adjustments made to the work environment, setting, schedule, duties, targets, supervisory methods, or format of work materials. These types of modifications are often no- or low-cost and require only the understanding and support of the employer. When there is an associated cost, it is usually indirect (e.g., labour hours).



Ergonomic supports are physical items that support the posture or position of the body and improve the ergonomic condition of the work environment. These include ergonomic office workstations (e.g., chairs, desks, monitor risers, ergonomic keyboards), ergonomic storage solutions and equipment (e.g., ergonomic salon carts or tool backpacks), and other equipment that improves posture while working (e.g., reachers, lifters, document holders).

Assistive technology hardware refers to electronic devices such as tablets, headsets, microphones, lamps, and computer equipment to assist with performing work tasks (excluding ergonomic devices).



Assistive technology software refers to any computer program or mobile app used to assist with performing a task, such as screen readers, speech-to-text programs, or planning and memory apps.

Personal equipment is any clothing, medical, or other personal item used by an individual with a disability for comfort or to support with work tasks. This includes items like blue-light blocking glasses, earplugs, compression garments, heating pads, masks, and fidget toys.





Transportation and mobility supports are supports that assist with movement and locomotion, including mobility devices like wheelchairs and canes.

Human supports refer to services provided by a person. This includes interpreters, scribes and notetakers, coaches, support workers, and therapists.



Lastly, the **Other** category contains items that did not fit into the above list, including office items, products for support animals, and cleaning supplies.

Approach

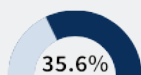
Data from 2422 records of client accommodations were coded by expert reviewers into one of the accommodation categories above. The data also contained information about the cost of procuring the accommodation (if any), and information about the client who needed the accommodation, such as their disability.

When CCRW was not involved with procuring a paid accommodation recorded on a client's file, this could mean the expense was covered by the employer, the client supplied their own previously purchased item, or the employer did not fully implement the accommodation. These 630 records are excluded from our cost analyses, but were included in our exploration of the frequency of different types of accommodation requests.

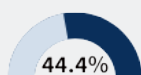


The Average One-Time Cost of Accommodations

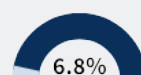
The average one-time cost of a workplace accommodation, across all accommodation categories, was **\$375.25**. This number excludes free accommodations and any accommodations for which we did not have expense data.



Over a third (35.6%) of paid accommodations cost less than \$100.



Another 44.4% cost more than \$100, but less than \$500.



Only 6.8% cost \$1000 or more.

Assistive technology hardware

accommodations were the most expensive, averaging **\$440.39**. These accommodations included items such as computer monitors, tablets, and other electronics, contributing to the higher price tag.



However, the average cost of hardware accommodations was not significantly more expensive* than the average cost of **assistive technology software** (\$366.66), **human supports** (\$375.40), **transportation and mobility supports** (\$337.25) and **ergonomic supports** (\$400.41).

It is important to note that **human supports** are the most likely type of accommodation to incur a recurring cost. This number represents the one-time cost of procuring a human support such as interpreting services or coaching. Assistive technologies, ergonomic supports, and transportation and mobility supports are typically one-time costs.

Aside from the **Other** category (average = \$69.30), **personal equipment** accommodations were the least expensive (\$234.01). These accommodations were often relatively low-cost items like fidget toys, braces, fitness equipment, or specialized clothing needed by the worker with a disability.

Work Modifications: A low- or no-cost way way to improve workplace accessibility

The most common types of accommodation requests were for **assistive technology hardware** (24.9%), **assistive technology software** (21.6%), and **work modifications** (18.0%). Nearly one-fifth of accommodations records had **no cost attached**.^{**} These accommodations have no direct cost to employers to implement. Nearly all these accommodations fell into the **work modifications** category.

Because 1) our individual records of work modifications requests often include multiple components – for example, a record of the client’s request for regular task reminders as well as a quiet workspace – and 2) CCRW supports clients and employers with the assessment of accommodation needs and procurement of supports like assistive technologies, the frequency of assistive technology requests compared to workplace modifications requests is almost certainly skewed, compared to the requests employers would typically receive. Data from the Canadian Survey on Disability (2022) show that work modifications including modified duties, modified work hours, and working from home remain the most common adjustments needed by workers with disabilities.³²

Statistics Canada does not publish data about the types of accommodations requested by employees with different experiences of barriers. Our data suggests that work modifications are requested by workers with all kinds of disabilities and are often the only type of accommodations needed by employees with mental health, learning, and medical disabilities. These low- or no-cost accommodations are thus a relatively easy way employers can make their workplaces more accessible to employees with many non-apparent and/or episodic disabilities.

^{*}Not statistically significant, based on a group-means comparison of the average cost of accommodations across categories.

^{**}Some (but not all) work modifications could incur small, **indirect** costs to employers in labour hours or through additional purchases. For example, requests for additional training or training refreshers, alternate formats of materials, or modifications made to the work environment (e.g., changing the lighting) may result in small indirect costs to businesses. Many of these accommodations, however, are completely free: providing clear and direct communication; giving reminders and task lists; using larger font sizes; allowing employees to sit while working or to eat a snack; and modifying break schedules are all examples of requested modifications that are unlikely to incur any direct or indirect costs to employers.

Creating Lasting Change

Behavioural scientists and policymakers sometimes use the COM-B model – short for capabilities, opportunities, and motivators of behaviour – to understand how to move from planning to acting. The advantage of the COM-B model is how it connects with specific change interventions, like educational campaigns, service design, and policy and legislation.⁴²

To hire inclusively, employers need to have the capability (knowledge, competence, and understanding of disability and accessibility), opportunity (access to talent pools and the resources needed to create an accessible workplace), and motivation (the desire to hire and manage a diverse spectrum of talent and, importantly, the desire to challenge internalized stigma). This is the core of **disability confidence**⁴¹ – to create lasting change, employer disengagement and reluctance to hire workers with disabilities needs to be addressed at multiple levels: knowledge, capacity, and attitudes.

Nagtegaal et al.'s comprehensive review of the factors influencing disability-inclusive hiring behaviour found that:¹

- **Large organizations** were more likely to hire workers with disabilities.
- Employers who felt **motivated to help others** were more likely to hire workers with disabilities.
- Employers who recognized the **competitive advantage** of being inclusive were more likely to hire workers with disabilities.

Organizational size is an **opportunity factor**: the employer's capacity to carry out a behaviour, including factors like finances. Changing opportunity factors requires building capacity through providing resources and support to organizations.

The second and third factors are **motivational**: the attitudinal elements that drive behaviour.

Let's consider the impact of organizational size first, and how small- and medium-sized employers can be supported in building capacity.



Building Capacity: Creating the Opportunity for Disability Confidence

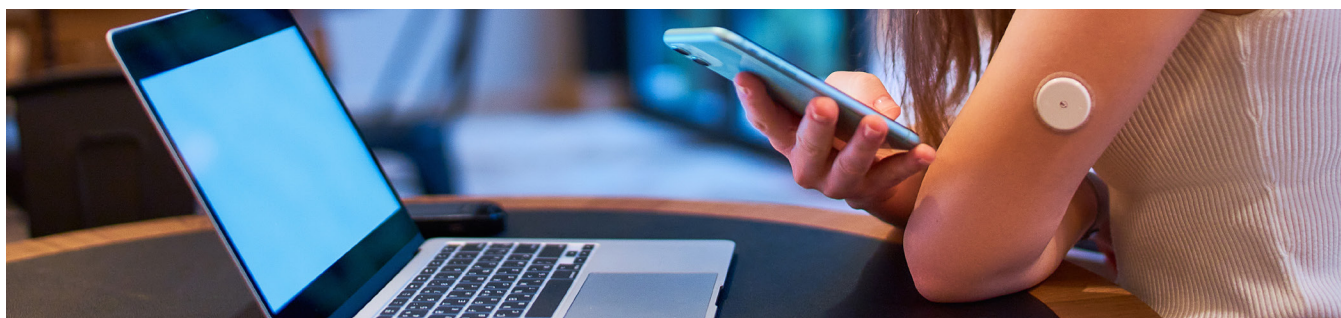
Small (1-99 employees) and medium (100-499 employees) enterprises (SMEs) comprise 99.8% of businesses in Canada.⁴³ SMEs, compared to large enterprises, are also most in need of capacity-building and resources to support inclusive hiring.

American studies on the recruitment and employment of persons with disabilities have found that larger organizations are more likely to employ workers with disabilities and less concerned about accommodation costs.^{13,44} Large organizations are also more likely to have diversity mandates as well as comprehensive policies and standardized hiring processes that help prevent overt discrimination.^{13,44} For example, one study found that medium and large organizations (with 100 or more employees) were less likely

than organizations with less than 100 employees to discriminate against job applicants who used wheelchairs.⁴⁵ Larger organizations may also be less preoccupied with ‘fit’ – how well they believe a new hire will integrate with existing employees – making them less likely to discriminate against workers on this basis.⁴⁵

SMEs do not have the same opportunity as large organizations to implement accessibility and inclusion initiatives. Very small businesses may not have dedicated HR staff or formal HR policies. Budgetary constraints can limit SMEs’ ability to implement comprehensive, inclusive recruitment processes and outreach strategies, and they are thus more likely to rely on informal recruitment practices like word-of-mouth and personal referrals.⁴³ Unfortunately, discrimination is more common in small and medium-sized organizations,⁴⁵ with small organizations expressing concern about the perceived cost of accommodations, hindrances to productivity, and safety risks associated with hiring workers with disabilities.⁴⁴ As such, SMEs need tailored support and access to resources to help them leverage the accessibility advantage and retain diverse talent.

Per the COM-B model, levers that can help change opportunity factors include environmental and social change interventions: building capacity through money, time, access to talent pipelines, and other resources; as well as by promoting social opportunity through modelling inclusive actions and normalizing the benefits of inclusion and accessibility.⁴²



Employment services organizations and accessibility consultants can support SMEs by providing access to talent pools, subsidized hiring opportunities, identifying accommodation needs, and removing some of the administrative burden employers face in inclusive hiring. For example, they can provide guidance and consultation on compliance with accessibility standards. They can also support the creation and dissemination of resources like toolkits and guides to support SMEs in building disability confidence and implementing accessibility plans.

Large organizations can also act as leaders in inclusive hiring, helping to promote inclusion as a sociocultural norm, and modelling the advantages of inclusion and accessibility. Where possible, small and medium-sized employers can aim to adopt similar policies and standardized hiring processes as those which have been proven to work in larger organizations.⁴⁵ Business networks and associations are an avenue through which SMEs can connect with other SMEs or larger organizations to learn about best practices, gain access to resources, and connect with like-minded businesses. Larger organizations may even consider providing services to SMEs to assist with human resources training, recruitment, and accessibility compliance education.⁴³ Consulting with advocacy groups or learning from disability confidence courses can further support SMEs in developing inclusive hiring policies and increase their disability confidence.⁴⁶

At the policy level, financial incentives for SMEs to recruit and retain diverse talent can support the financial capacity of SMEs and are a potentially effective solution to promote employment equity. As employers with disabilities are more likely to hire workers with disabilities,⁴⁶ supporting more persons with disabilities to become small or medium-sized employers themselves could also improve labour market participation for workers with disabilities. We discuss entrepreneurship as a career pathway further in the first article from the 2024 Trends Report, *Career advancement pathways for workers with disabilities*.

Motivating Change: Recognizing the Accessible Advantage

Employers who would like to hire more inclusively, but aren't yet ready to put in the work, may be experiencing **motivational** barriers. Organizations can be supported to help them understand the return on investment: the rewards that come from prioritizing inclusion and accessibility for their businesses, as well as their workers, customers, and society at large.

The COM-B model proposes that motivational barriers can be changed through education and awareness campaigns, training and resources, and establishing rules and standards for good practice – as well as setting up consequences for non-compliance.⁴² This includes both policy levers as well as the development and implementation of internal standards. For example, a systematic review of the role of human resource practices in hiring people with disabilities showed that standardizing hiring practices reduces bias in hiring decisions.⁴⁷

Increasing knowledge and implementing interventions to build disability confidence can reassure employers in small organizations that the cost of accommodations is reasonable, and that accessibility makes good business sense. Communications and awareness campaigns can also help to undo myths and misconceptions about the productivity and competence of workers with disabilities. Research has shown that understanding the abilities and challenges specific to disability can help empower employers in small or medium-sized businesses to hire more persons with disabilities.⁴⁶

As we have discussed, there is ample evidence about the concrete benefits of hiring workers with disabilities.³⁵ Mobilizing this evidence through education, trainings, workshops, and media campaigns are pathways to improving motivation. The Government of Canada has recently launched initiatives such as the Inclusive Workplaces advertising campaign to raise awareness among employers of the value of hiring persons with disabilities.⁴⁸

Behavioural science research suggests other promising opportunities to motivate employers towards more inclusive hiring behaviour. Storytelling interventions may be a strategy to foster motivation and hiring intention.¹ Having employers share testimonials about the benefits of having employees with disabilities may convince other employers that inclusive hiring is worth pursuing. A strategy called imagined contact has also been successfully used to reduce misconceptions about the capabilities of persons with disabilities. In this context, imagined intergroup contact involves the simulation of positive interactions with persons with disabilities to reduce bias.⁴⁹ Imagined contact can also be simulated in virtual scenarios, such as Virtual Reality (VR) experiences. These emerging technologies are promising tools for both workers and employers to build confidence and knowledge in safe, non-judgmental environments.



SPOTLIGHT

On Hospitality & Leisure

In an American study from 2013, Jasper and Waldhart found that leisure and hospitality organizations were more likely to employ workers with disabilities compared with all other industries.¹³ What sets this industry apart from others as a destination for workers with disabilities?

In 2024, CCRW supported **Tourism HR Canada's Belong Project** by conducting and analyzing focus groups with jobseekers with disabilities in the tourism industry. Drawn to the potential of working in nature or travelling, flexible and positive work environments, and creating accessible tourism experiences for others, many jobseekers with disabilities were interested in working in tourism.

The Belong initiative aims to strengthen the capacity of the tourism industry to provide inclusive, accessible workplaces. From the research CCRW carried out with Tourism HR Canada, we learned that many of the

accessibility barriers that do exist in the tourism industry mirror those faced across the labour market – including attitudinal barriers and discrimination. Jobseekers who found it difficult to break into the industry highlighted experiences like being let go after disclosing a disability, experiencing stigma related to mental health disabilities, use of derogatory language in the workplace, and not considering workers with disabilities for customer-facing roles. Through a range of activities including employment training, research, resource development, and a national workplace accreditation program, Tourism HR Canada is working to dismantle these barriers and support the long-term labour market integration of workers with disabilities across Canada's tourism industry.

Keeping the Momentum: Possibilities in Innovative Technologies

Emerging technologies present an opportunity for forward-thinking employers to become more accessible and inclusive. In our spotlight on Emerging Developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI), we highlight considerations for employers looking to use AI technologies, including how to use these tools responsibly in their recruitment and hiring processes.

Virtual reality (VR) technology is another innovative tool with the potential to help employers understand and embrace disability inclusion¹ and build their capacity to manage the diverse spectrum of human ability.⁵⁰ [Promising VR interventions and pilot projects are underway at CCRW](#) and elsewhere for jobseekers and workers with disabilities, helping them upskill and develop workplace confidence. These tools could also be used by employers to help managers, executives, and HR professionals dismantle inaccurate beliefs that interacting with a person with a disability is stressful or difficult, and to grow their confidence and comfort talking about disability and accessibility.



SPOTLIGHT

Emerging Developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The use of AI in employment is growing at a tremendous rate. Based on data from tech consulting firm Gartner, 47% of businesses will likely use AI technology in their human resources processes in the near future.⁵¹ According to human resources consulting firm Mercer, 81% of talent acquisition organizations have indicated they use AI for candidate screening, and 50% use it for candidate evaluation.⁵²

AI's impact on employment is multifaceted. Factors like the direction of technological innovation, availability and quality of data, regulatory and ethical frameworks, social and cultural norms, education and training systems, and labour market conditions all influence how AI is developed, deployed, and used across sectors and employment contexts.

AI and Workers with Disabilities

AI recruitment and hiring tools often use data from previously successful applicants in their training models to develop and refine their algorithms. Because people with disabilities are less likely to be employed, they are also less likely to be represented in training data.^{53,54}

This means that historic employment decisions have a significant impact on the recommendations made by AI tools about jobseekers with disabilities, and can perpetuate hiring biases.^{53,54} AI-powered tools without disability-inclusive data may, for example, unfairly discriminate against an applicant who cannot complete a business's online application form using a screen reader; or an applicant completing a psychometric test that hasn't been validated for people whose first language is American Sign Language. As such, AI must be used responsibly. Below are key considerations and best practices for employers looking to use AI solutions in their human resources processes.



Ethical Considerations^{53,55,56}

Algorithmic bias: Algorithmic bias is the discrimination that can result from using AI algorithms to make decisions, and can take the form of disability, gender, racial, educational, or socioeconomic biases.^{53,57} It is important to consider algorithmic bias in the context of AI-powered employment solutions to avoid discriminatory practices.

Job displacement & automation: AI-powered tools perform certain tasks at rates that exceed human potential.⁵⁸ Organizations must ensure employees are provided with opportunities for reskilling and upskilling where automation may occur in the future.

Privacy & confidentiality: Employers must consider how personal data are collected and stored by AI tools used for organizational decision-making. Key questions include: What data are collected? Where are the data stored? Who has access to the data? Are users informed how their data will be used?

The human element: Excessive reliance on AI-powered recruitment can impact both end-user experience and business reputation. Organizations must ensure AI-powered recruitment tools do not replace ‘the human element’⁵⁹ – the authenticity only people can provide. AI should augment, not replace, existing recruitment practices to ensure the right talent is connected to the right opportunity.

Responsible AI^{53,60}

Responsible AI guides the development and use of AI in a way that aligns with ethical values and social norms. Data should be representative, diverse, and unbiased to avoid creating or amplifying discrimination or injustice. Businesses should adopt principles and practices for using AI that address transparency, accountability, security, privacy, human dignity, and social responsibility. Staff must also be trained to use the tools responsibly, to understand best practices and think critically about their implementation, and to make sure the use of AI-powered tools aligns with the organization’s values.

When using AI for recruitment and hiring, businesses must understand how the tool works and how the model was trained to ensure it does not disproportionately discriminate against any group of people. To do so, businesses should ask questions about the technology behind the tool and how the vendor gathers its data. For example: how are they monitoring and auditing their data and algorithms to prevent bias and inequitable outcomes?

There is no universal solution for balancing human decision-making and AI. Different employment contexts will require different approaches. AI is a work-in-progress; it is efficient and useful, but also imperfect and incomplete. Remembering this helps us be mindful when using AI.



Best Practices for Responsible Use of AI in the Workplace^{53,61}

Investing in data quality and diversity: Data is the fuel of AI, and the quality and diversity of data can affect the performance and fairness of AI systems. Businesses should ensure that the data sets are accurate, complete, representative, and as unbiased as possible to avoid creating or amplifying discrimination or injustice.

Continuous testing: Responsible use of AI involves continuous testing, which improves trust and accountability. It also ensures the systems adhere to ethical standards, and that the organization's values are incorporated throughout the system lifecycle, while allowing organizations to detect and resolve new biases that may appear.

Establishing standards: Processes and standards for implementing AI should be aligned with the organization's vision, mission, values, and goals. It is important to have a clear and coherent AI strategy that defines the purpose, scope, objectives, and metrics of AI initiatives. Moreover, it is important to have a governance framework that ensures accountability, transparency, and ethical implementation of AI systems.

Privacy, security, and transparency: Organizations should ensure the AI systems maintain security that aligns with their internal standards and be transparent about how decisions are made. All end users, including applicants and employees, should be informed about how their data will be collected, stored, accessed, and used.

Inclusive & user-centric design: AI systems should be accessible and work for everyone. This means the process of developing and refining the tool, as well as decisions about procuring AI-powered tools, should involve consulting teams with diverse backgrounds to gather feedback, and organizations should avoid relying on a single tool to meet all their organizational decision-making needs.



Taking Action

Employers are the gatekeepers of the workforce. Addressing employer attitudes and the intention-action gap in hiring decisions is necessary for employment equity. However, it is also a business advantage. Far from being an inconvenience, employers directly benefit from inclusive hiring, as they gain access to skilled talent pools, diverse perspectives, and new business opportunities.

Of course, to truly leverage the benefits of a diverse workforce, employers must also retain and develop their employees. Doing so requires a commitment to disability confidence across the employment lifecycle and embedding inclusivity at all levels of their organizations – from hiring managers and HR professionals to direct supervisors and staff. In article 1 of our 2024 Trends Report, **Career advancement pathways for workers with disabilities**, we discuss how employers can foster inclusive workplace cultures and career development opportunities for workers with disabilities.

Recruitment and hiring are the first steps. By addressing capacity and motivational barriers through education, training, and resources, employers can be inspired to take concrete, meaningful actions towards disability-inclusive hiring, and ultimately see the benefits of a diverse workforce. The strategies discussed in this article offer a starting point for advocates, policymakers, and accessibility consultants – as well as employers themselves – to identify and challenge misconceptions and foster disability confidence.



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