



Disability Inclusion in the Skilled Trades: A Blueprint for Change

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The skilled trades are changing. Labour challenges, technological innovation, and Canada's shift toward both a low-carbon future and a priority of housing are reshaping not only how trades work is done, but who gets to do it. As the trades evolve to meet the demands of the climate crisis and a growing need for workers, it must also become more inclusive.

While calls to diversify the trades workforce have grown louder, people with disabilities are still frequently overlooked. Disability inclusion has gained traction in many industries, but the skilled trades continue to lag behind.

Through CCRW's Accessibility FIRST program, we learned first hand about accessibility and inclusion challenges in the trades. Outdated ideas about disability and who belongs in the trades, along with barriers in education, work, and policy, have created an ecosystem that excludes workers with disabilities.



CCRW's Accessibility FIRST



From 2022-2025, CCRW led Accessibility FIRST, a nationwide government-funded service designed to identify and dismantle barriers faced by apprentices with disabilities, who are workers learning a trade from an employer. Accessibility FIRST helped apprentices with disabilities at every stage of their trades careers, from getting started to finishing training hours to completing their apprenticeship.

Accessibility FIRST combined direct support for apprentices with advocacy for sectoral change, positioning CCRW as a leading voice for disability inclusion in the trades. We delivered practical solutions, tools, and education to promote inclusive hiring, onboarding, and retention. These efforts were made possible through strategic partnerships with unions, trades employers, and nonprofit organizations across the skilled trades ecosystem.

This article explores how disability inclusion can help build a more resilient, innovative, and future-ready trades sector. We use research, organizational experience, and real stories from apprentices and CCRW's Accessibility Consultants – who have worked closely with apprentices, trades employers, and unions – to show the barriers faced by tradespeople with disabilities and opportunities for change in the trades sector, providing a blueprint for making the skilled trades accessible to everyone.

The Skilled Trades are at a Crossroads

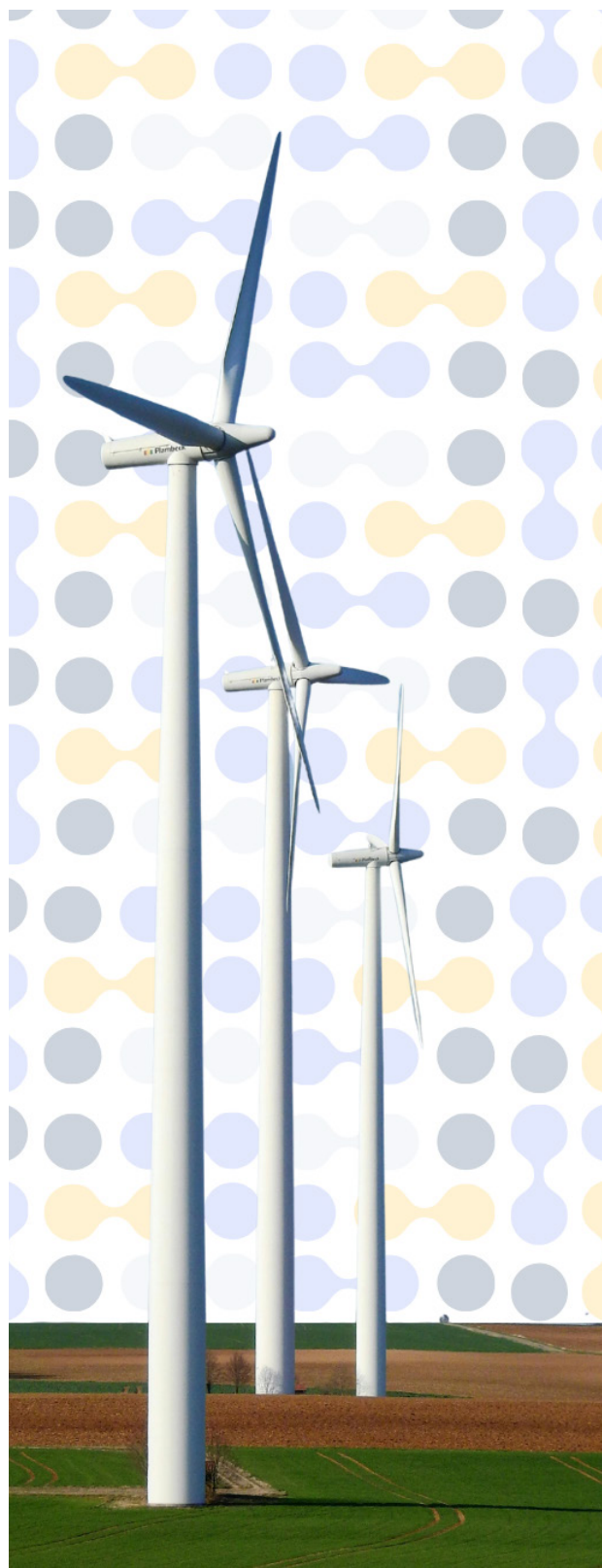
The skilled trades have long been a cornerstone of Canada's economy. They include a wide range of occupations that require hands-on work, specialized training, and practical problem-solving. From electricians and carpenters to cooks and hairstylists, tradespeople build and maintain the infrastructure and provide the services that keep communities running.¹

At the forefront of the challenges facing the skilled trades sector is a growing labour shortage, which threatens the stability of trades services and infrastructure across the country. It is estimated that over 700,000 skilled tradespeople will retire by 2028,² and there are not enough workers to replace them.

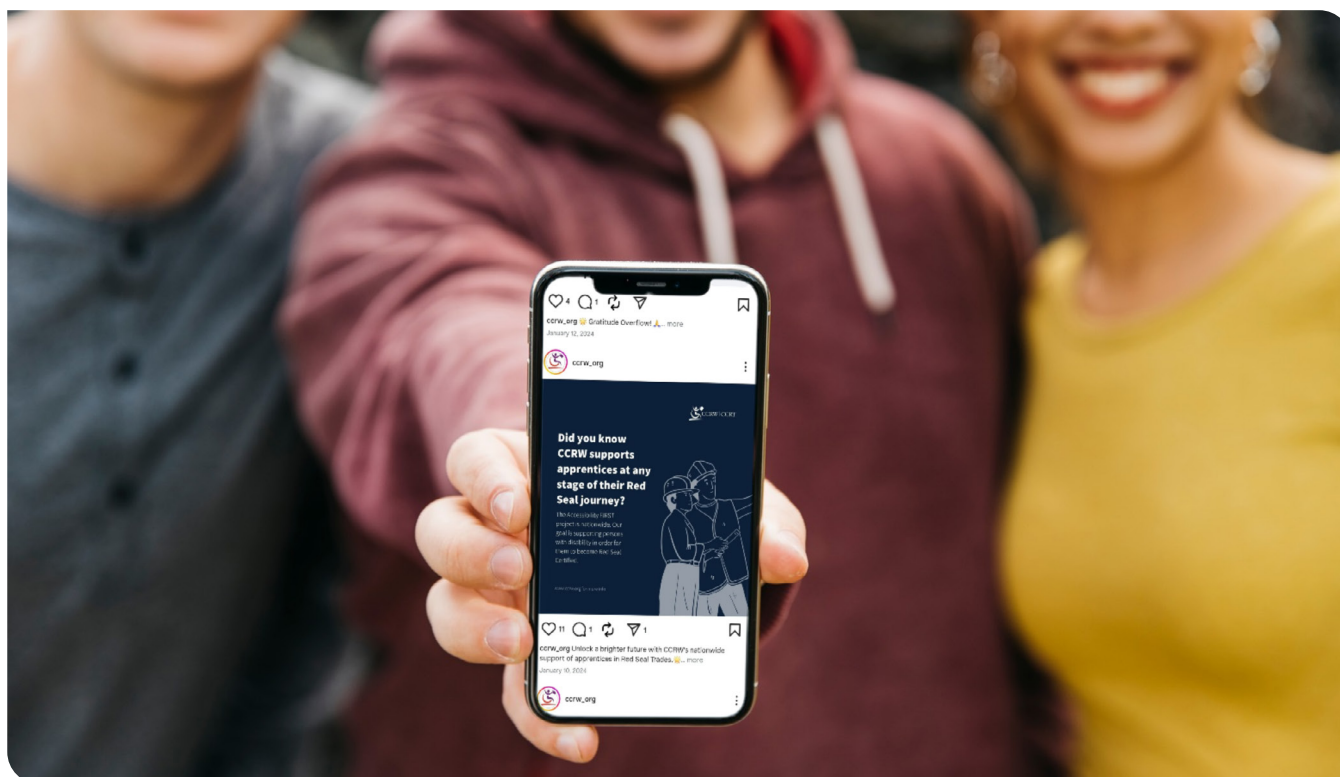
Recruitment is also a challenge. While people are more likely today to recommend that youth pursue trades education over general university programs,³ historically the trades were perceived as less valuable careers, which discouraged youth.⁴ Many are unaware of the opportunities available in the trades or how to access them.⁵ And foreign-trained tradespeople face challenges having their credentials recognized, leading to underemployment and wasted talent.^{6,7}

At the same time, the green transition and emerging technologies are transforming trades work. Jobs in fossil fuel industries are declining or changing as new roles emerge in industries like renewable energy and sustainable agriculture.⁸ And new technologies including automation, digital tools such as reality capture and building information modeling, and smart systems are becoming more common on job sites and in workshops, changing how tasks are performed.^{9,10}

These shifts are redefining what it means to be a tradesperson today. The image of a physically tough worker performing repetitive manual tasks is giving way to a more complex reality that values diverse skill sets, continuous learning, and adaptability. These changes are creating opportunities to imagine a more inclusive trades ecosystem. Canada's skilled trades sector cannot afford to overlook the talent, experience, and creativity that people with disabilities bring to the workforce.



Insights from **Accessibility FIRST**



Disability inclusion delivers both social and economic benefits.¹¹ Inclusive workplaces gain productivity,¹² innovation,¹³ and higher employee retention,¹³ while access to high-quality employment improves workers' health,¹⁴ wellbeing,¹⁵ and economic security. In the skilled trades, inclusive hiring can help address labour shortages by tapping into a skilled and under represented talent pool.

Unfortunately, there is limited national data on disability inclusion in the trades, making it challenging to measure progress or to identify the barriers faced by apprentices and tradespeople with disabilities.

In the absence of comprehensive public data, data collected from Accessibility FIRST provides valuable insight into the lived experiences of over 230 apprentices with disabilities across Canada. These data highlight key challenges and opportunities within the trades.

Accessibility FIRST participants self-identified

as persons with disabilities and sought support from CCRW. As such, their experiences do not necessarily reflect the broader population of tradespeople with disabilities, who may not disclose their disability to others or even identify as people with disabilities. In fact, one challenge that became clear through Accessibility FIRST is that there is limited recognition of many kinds of disabilities – especially mental health, learning, and other non-apparent disabilities – in the trades ecosystem.

Additionally, most Accessibility FIRST apprentices (78%) were from Eastern Canada, including the provinces of Newfoundland (10%), Nova Scotia (58%), Prince Edward Island (<1%), New Brunswick (1%), and Ontario (9%), which influences the trades represented, and the kinds of barriers and supports reported by apprentices.

Below is a snapshot of the Accessibility FIRST project, including the apprentices we supported, the barriers they faced, and the supports that enabled their success.



Apprentices Supported by Accessibility FIRST

Across 233 apprentices, 29% identified as women. As of 2017, this is more than double the national average (13.7%) of women in the trades.¹⁶ Accessibility FIRST also supported 11% Indigenous apprentices (compared to 6% nationally),¹⁶ 14% from visible minority groups, and 3% newcomers.

When people think about disability, many still imagine physical or sensory disabilities – like a person who uses a wheelchair, or a blind person. But disability is diverse, and non-apparent disabilities are among the most common types of disabilities in Canada. This was also true among FIRST apprentices, who most frequently disclosed **learning disabilities** (42%), **mental health-related disabilities** (29%), **physical disabilities** (11%), **medical disabilities** (7%), and **agility disabilities** (4%).

Top 5 disability types reported by apprentices

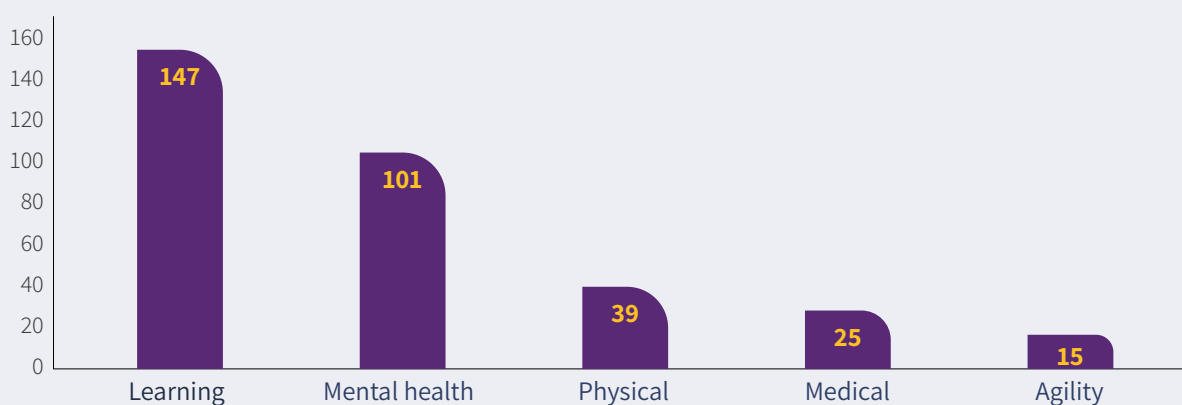


Chart 1. Top 5 disability types reported by apprentices supported by Accessibility FIRST.

There is also a common misconception that people with disabilities can't work physically demanding jobs. The apprentices supported by Accessibility FIRST directly challenged this view. The five most common trades occupations these apprentices held included automotive service technicians, truck and bus mechanics, and mechanical repair technicians (34 apprentices or 14%); electricians (27 or 12%); carpenters (24 or 10%); industrial electricians (21 or 9%); and plumbers (20 or 9%).

Top 5 trades of interest among apprentices

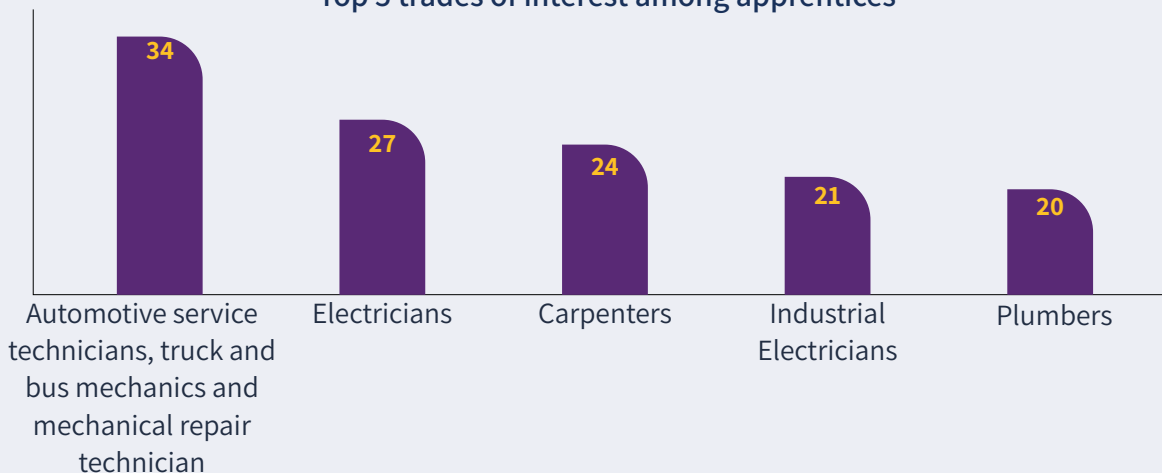


Chart 2. Top 5 trades of interest among apprentices supported by Accessibility FIRST.



Key Barriers among Apprentices with Disabilities

A defining takeaway of Accessibility FIRST was the barriers apprentices experienced to entering and remaining in the trades.

Of the 222 apprentices who shared their barriers with us, the three most common were **mental health barriers** (reported by 21% of apprentices), **barriers related to education and training** (reported by 21% of apprentices), and **financial barriers** (reported by 15% of apprentices).

For those facing mental health-related barriers, many described issues such as stress, anxiety around school and exams, financial instability, and the pressure of navigating gender dynamics in male-dominated trades. Others experienced a combination of anxiety, stress, and depression that made it difficult to succeed.

These experiences aren't surprising given what we know about the broader trades ecosystem. Research shows that trades work is often demanding and shaped by unrealistic time pressures, which can lead to burnout and injury.¹⁷ Challenges like chronic pain, overuse of alcohol or pain medication, unclear job responsibilities or expectations, job insecurity, and conflict

with others can impact the mental health of workers.^{17,18} And while mental health challenges are common among workers in the trades, they remain stigmatized.¹⁷ Workers with mental health-related disabilities may be dismissed or have little support from their employer or union representatives.¹⁷

Apprentices supported by Accessibility FIRST also shared barriers linked to learning disabilities or difficulties with reading, writing, and processing technical information. Apprentices with disabilities may need accommodations during their education and training, particularly in classroom settings,¹⁹ yet tools such as audio modules, tutors, taped lectures, and exam readers are often unavailable or inconsistently provided.^{19,20} Some apprentices identified the Red Seal Certification exam as a major hurdle – not only the difficulty of the test itself, but also the pressure to pass from employers and the lack of accommodations or resources to support them. If apprentices with disabilities drop out or delay certification, it impacts their career trajectory and reinforces the misconception that disability is incompatible with trades work.





Finances were also a barrier to entry or to retaining employment, especially among the Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+, and women apprentices with disabilities supported through Accessibility FIRST. For some, tuition costs were prohibitive; for others, the high up-front cost of purchasing tools, equipment, and safety gear prevented them from getting started in their careers. For others still, living expenses related to transportation, childcare, and other essentials made it hard to stay on the job. Ergonomic work gear was a particular challenge, as apprentices with financial barriers often had to resort to buying less ergonomic gear, which can lead to or worsen injury.

These financial challenges are part of a broader pattern. Disability and poverty are closely linked in Canada. Persons with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty.²¹ They also face higher cost of living, due to additional expenses for transportation, assistive technology, medical care, and accessible housing.²² Among those with unmet disability-related needs, 73% or 3.2 million cite cost as the main barrier.²¹ This economic reality compounds the challenges apprentices face, making it harder to access the supports and accommodations they need to thrive in the trades.



Key Supports for Apprentices with Disabilities

To help address these barriers, CCRW provided nearly 600 accommodations and wraparound supports to apprentices through Accessibility FIRST. The two most common were **job site supports** and **school supports**.

Due to financial barriers, many apprentices needed help getting the tools and gear required to do their jobs safely and effectively. Almost half (46%) of the supports provided to apprentices were job site supports, which are items such as ergonomic and non-ergonomic tools, work supplies, work apparel, and safety gear. Over half of the apprentices who received job site supports needed tools and supplies (61%), while more than a third needed safety gear (35%). This points to a significant access gap in basic equipment, which risks impacting both worker safety and organizational success.

Many apprentices supported by Accessibility FIRST also benefited from supports intended to assist with barriers related to education and training. The largest category of supports in this area was technology and hardware (68%). These included tools like e-reader pens, laptops, and other assistive devices that helped apprentices engage with course content and prepare for exams in an accessible way. The high demand for school-based supports highlights how many apprentices face barriers in the classroom and reinforces the importance of accessible training environments and learning tools.

These findings from Accessibility FIRST offer a snapshot of the systemic challenges apprentices with disabilities face in the skilled trades. Mental health and learning-related barriers, financial constraints, and unmet accommodation needs point to persistent gaps in how trades education, employment, and support systems are designed.

Practical supports like those provided through Accessibility FIRST can help apprentices with disabilities begin their trades careers. However, there are many deeper, systemic challenges – including cultural, attitudinal, and structural barriers – that will require sustained, cross-sector efforts to address.





Systemic Barriers in the Skilled Trades

Apprentices supported by Accessibility FIRST shared that there are systemic barriers that impact how workers with disabilities enter and navigate careers in the trades. This section explores the **cultural and attitudinal dynamics** that influence perceptions of disability in the trades, as well as how **financial exclusion** acts as a structural barrier that restricts access and advancement for workers with disabilities.

Cultural Norms and Misconceptions

As one CCRW Accessibility Consultant shared: *“I’ve heard things like ‘oh, we don’t have people like that here.... not on our job site. We can’t hire people like that.’”*

Many people assume that disability and trades work are not compatible. The ideal tradesperson is often believed to be a man who is strong, quick, and works independently. Construction and other trades occupied primarily by men are frequently considered the domain of White, straight, cisgender, and non-disabled men.²³ Employing tradespeople who are non-White, disabled, trans*, gay and/or queer men, and women is seen by many as devaluing the work or threatening the masculinity of other workers.²³

Disability itself is also often misunderstood. Through Accessibility FIRST, CCRW found that many people think disability only means visible physical disabilities, which are assumed not to fit with the physical demands of trades work. But disability comes in many forms. It can be visible or non-apparent; chronic, episodic, or acute; and it exists in every sector, including the trades.

These narrow views of disability are attitudinal barriers that lead to unfair hiring practices in the trades. For example, construction and manufacturing companies are less likely than other sectors such as hospitality to recruit, hire, and employ persons with disabilities due to coworker and customer attitudes, concerns about health insurance costs, and the belief that the work cannot be done by persons with disabilities.^{24,25}





Stigma also persists around workplace injury. Becoming disabled on the job in the trades remains taboo; workers may not report injuries or ask for accommodations out of fear of being seen as weak or less capable.²⁶ These fears are not unfounded, as some workers with a disability face dismissal.²⁷ Coworkers may also have negative attitudes toward workers with a disability, believing the worker with a disability will impact team productivity, increase workers' compensation premiums, or damage the company's health and safety record.²⁷ Many of these concerns were echoed by apprentices supported through Accessibility FIRST, who told us they preferred accommodations that weren't obvious to others, like digital tape measures, so they wouldn't be judged.

These beliefs and attitudes effect who is seen as capable, who gets support, and who gets left out in the trades. Addressing these barriers requires a shift in understanding who has access to jobs in the trades and what it means to work in the trades.

To begin shifting these cultural norms, we need interventions that challenge stereotypes and promote inclusive values across the trades ecosystem. This includes but is not limited to initiatives that increase the visibility of the contributions of tradespeople with disabilities, as well as initiatives that increase employer awareness of disability and their capacity to hire inclusively. We'll explore these and other strategies in the next section.

CCRW Learnings: Strategic Language Use to Build Awareness of Disability in the Trades



While the words ‘disability’ and ‘accommodation’ are sometimes met with hesitation, neither are bad words. In fact, they are neutral and important. A person with a disability is someone who faces barriers to participation because of a societal failure to accommodate their physical, cognitive, or psychosocial needs. Accommodation describes the supports a person with a disability needs to overcome those barriers so they can participate fully in work and life.

Unfortunately, these terms are often misunderstood. Sometimes people think that disability means someone is less capable, and accommodations are unfair advantages or forms

of special treatment. These ideas usually come from stigma and limited experience working alongside people with disabilities or those who require accommodations.

CCRW Accessibility Consultants often encountered hesitation when talking about disability and accommodation with employers, unions, and even apprentices. Many people didn’t believe that people with disabilities worked or could work in the trades. As a result, they assumed CCRW’s supports for apprentices with disabilities in the trades were not relevant to them or their sector.



But when our team reframed these conversations using terms like ‘barriers’ and ‘productivity supports,’ people were more open. Using statistics, sharing real-life stories, and inviting people to empathize with a variety of disability experiences made the conversation more relatable. This strategy helped move the needle by encouraging people in the trades to consider how accommodations such as additional breaks, ergonomic tools and workwear, and assistive technology like digital tape measurers, could be key in boosting productivity and long-term success on the job.

This kind of reframing isn’t about avoiding the words disability and accommodation.

It’s about meeting people where they are to invite critical reflection on disability. Using less stigmatized language, like barriers and productivity supports, can help engage people in crucial conversations around accessibility and inclusion. These conversations help to destigmatize disability and build understanding.

There is still work to be done in dismantling stigma towards disabilities and accommodations in the skilled trades. Strategic language can help start important conversations, but it should be part of a broader effort to promote disability inclusion, challenge misconceptions, and build a more confident and inclusive trades sector.



Financial Exclusion

While CCRW’s Accessibility FIRST program provided direct financial supports to apprentices, these efforts also revealed deeper systemic gaps in how financial access to the trades is structured.

Financial barriers have long shaped who can enter and remain in the trades. These are not personal challenges; they are systemic obstacles embedded in how trades education, certification, and employment are structured. Apprentices with disabilities often face compounded financial pressures due to inaccessible funding models, high upfront costs, and broader social inequities. These barriers reflect a deeper failure of the trades ecosystem to design inclusive pathways into the workforce.

Federal and provincial programs aim to reduce financial barriers for apprentices, employers,

unions, and training institutions. Apprentices can receive loans to support technical training, employers can receive wage subsidies, tax credits, and targeted funding to support apprenticeships, and unions and training institutes can receive funding to deliver training, support projects, and upgrade equipment. Yet these mechanisms often overlook the compounded financial pressures experienced by apprentices with disabilities.

Grants and loans for apprentices rarely cover disability-related expenses like assistive technology, accessible transportation, or support services. They also don’t account for the financial instability many persons with disabilities experience. The traditional “block release” model for apprentice training—requiring 8–12 weeks of in-class training—can be especially costly for apprentices with disabilities.



Current funding mechanisms may even create barriers. Among equity-deserving recipients of federal apprenticeship grants in Canada, apprentices with disabilities were the least likely to say that the grants helped to cover the cost of the apprenticeship.²⁸ This may be because many funding programs are tied to rigid eligibility rules, such as specific progression milestones or certification timelines, which don't reflect the realities of those facing health challenges, documentation delays, or unmet accommodation needs.

disabilities may be forced to delay or abandon their training, undermining both their career trajectories and broader efforts to build an inclusive trades workforce. Addressing these gaps requires a systemic redesign of funding models, which will be explored in the next section.

Systemic barriers in the skilled trades ecosystem highlights the need for coordinated system-wide change. The next section outlines a blueprint for building a disability-inclusive skilled trades ecosystem.

Without targeted financial supports that are accessible and inclusive, apprentices with

Compounded Barriers to Inclusion among Newcomers with Disabilities in the Red Seal Trades

We can see the impact of cultural, attitudinal, and structural barriers when examining the situation of newcomers with disabilities in the Red Seal Trades. Newcomers are often seen as a key solution to the labour shortage in the trades, yet they remain underrepresented in apprenticeship programs, making up less than 9% of apprentices,²⁹ despite comprising over 20% of the population.³⁰ For newcomers with disabilities, barriers to careers in the trades are often compounded by systemic, structural, and social challenges.





Intersecting Barriers: Immigration, Disability, and Access to Apprenticeship

Newcomers often struggle to get their credentials recognized, pass licensing requirements, and find employers to sponsor them. These challenges are intensified for those with disabilities due to inaccessible assessments and discriminatory assumptions.^{31,7} Many pursue trade qualification exams rather than formal apprenticeships, which offer fewer supports and are harder to access.⁶



Mobility, Certification, and Structural Constraints

Geographic mobility is lower among newcomer journeypersons due to financial constraints, limited networks, and settlement changes.³² For those with disabilities, mobility is further restricted by inaccessible housing, transportation, and a lack of local supports. While Red Seal certification is designed to facilitate interprovincial mobility, its impact remains modest, with Red Seal-endorsed journeypersons only slightly more likely to migrate or work across provinces.³²



Underrepresentation, Retention, and Economic Outcomes

Newcomers often work in lower-paid service trades.³³ They may face higher rates of self-employment, limiting access to employer-sponsored accommodations and benefits.³³ Apprentices who face job instability or personal challenges, such as harassment or family responsibilities, are significantly less likely to complete their programs, especially if they are women and/or in the service trades.³³

Improving inclusion in the Red Seal trades for newcomers with disabilities requires systemic change across the apprenticeship lifecycle, from recruitment and training to certification and employment. These changes must be grounded in the lived realities of those most affected and supported by data-informed policy, cross-sector collaboration, and sustained investment.



A Blueprint for Change

The skilled trades are part of a complex ecosystem including not just tradespersons and employers, but also educational institutions, unions, community organizations, and policy and regulatory systems. These institutions impact entry, participation, and career growth in the trades.

Efforts that target only one part of the ecosystem – for example, helping employers implement workplace accommodations – can be effective strategies to resolve practical barriers faced by workers with disabilities. However, creating lasting change requires interventions across multiple levels, including dismantling educational, financial, cultural, and policy barriers. Because accessibility and inclusion barriers exist at every level of the trades ecosystem, coordinated cross-sector efforts are needed to create change.

To help support people with disabilities enter, move through, and succeed in the trades, we have three key recommendations: **shifting the narrative**, **changing the rules**, and **embedding learning and feedback**.



Shift the Narrative

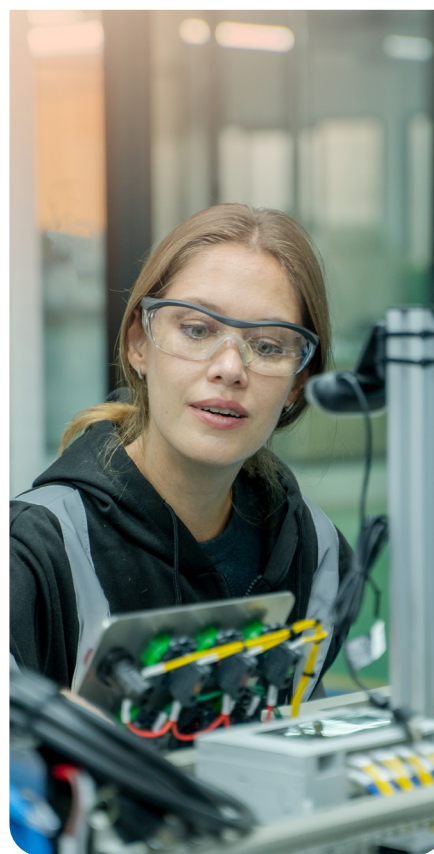
The perception that people with disabilities aren't capable of trades work is rooted in unfounded assumptions. As we discussed above, one misconception is that the trades require physical labour that people with disabilities are not capable of. However, many common disabilities are neither visible nor physical, and many physical disabilities can be accommodated. Additionally, today's trades sector requires a wide range of skills, many of which are not physical, such as digital skills and 'soft' skills like problem-solving.

These misconceptions exclude people with disabilities and make it hard for any tradesperson to slow down, ask for help, or work differently. Asking for accommodations or time off is often seen as weakness, so workers may push themselves too hard to prove they belong. This pressure can be especially intense for workers who face multiple forms of marginalization. One CCRW Accessibility Consultant described supporting a neurodivergent, Black, lesbian apprentice who feared disclosing her disability to her employer, concerned it would be yet “*another strike*” against her.



Changing the narrative isn't straightforward. Accessibility and disability inclusion have become familiar practices for educational institutions and unions, with dedicated disability offices emerging across post-secondary institutions,³⁴ and many unions focusing on protecting the rights of members with disabilities.^{35,36,37} But among employers, particularly in small and medium enterprises, attitudinal barriers remain some of the most persistent obstacles to inclusion.^{38,39}

To shift these attitudes, **we must replace harmful myths about disability** with real stories that show how diverse and adaptable trades work and trades workers with disabilities can be. This includes highlighting examples of successes, challenging stereotypes, and promoting inclusive values across all parts of the ecosystem, from schools and unions to employers and job sites. Real stories of tradespeople with disabilities, shared through videos, podcasts, panels, social media, and word of mouth, can challenge stereotypes and build employer capacity to hire inclusively. These stories should be developed in partnership with community organizations and tradespeople themselves, and shared through channels employers already trust, such as industry associations, trade magazines, and sector-specific conferences.



Advocates can also work directly with employers to communicate the value of inclusion. This includes:

- **Framing inclusion as a business asset**, emphasizing retention, productivity, and access to a wider talent pool.
- **Offering tailored workshops** about disability to inclusive employers.
- **Embedding disability awareness into existing training programs**, such as safety training, to normalize conversations about accommodations and support.



How Can I Help?

Actors across the ecosystem can help change perceptions about disability and the trades, reduce stigma, and promote a more inclusive culture.

Employers:

- Use available tools like CCRW's [Disability Confidence Toolkit](#) to support inclusive hiring, onboarding, and retention practices.
- Foster inclusive workplace cultures through anti-discrimination policies, peer support, and mental health resources.
- Connect workers with mentorship programs that link new workers with disabilities with experienced tradespeople with disabilities.
- Address internalized stigma about disability among organizational leadership and employees.
- Integrate disability awareness into onboarding and training to reduce stigma around requesting accommodations or supports.

Unions:

- Champion the rights of members with disabilities and advocate for inclusive workplace policies.
- Foster peer learning and challenge disability stereotypes through peer mentorship programs, support networks, and workshops or panels featuring tradespeople with disabilities.
- Promote retention by addressing harassment, job instability, and lack of representation in unionized workplaces.
- Incorporate disability inclusion in collective bargaining agreements by negotiating health benefits, leaves, access to accommodations, short and long-term disability plans, and accessibility improvements in trades workplaces or work sites.

Community Organizations:

- Focus on top-down approaches to educational efforts across the trades ecosystem.
- Provide employer education during down-seasons to build capacity for inclusive hiring and retention.
- Collaborate with media outlets and other skilled trades actors to promote inclusion narratives and challenge misconceptions about disability and trades work.



Change the Rules

Structural barriers continue to limit access and advancement for persons with disabilities in the skilled trades. These barriers are built into the rules and policies that shape how trades are organized, accessed, and certified.

In Canada, each province and territory has its own regulatory body that oversees licensing and certification, creating a patchwork of standards and pathways that can inadvertently exclude workers with disabilities. Licensing and certification requirements can vary between provinces and territories and across industries. Some trades require the completion of an apprenticeship for trades workers to be certified, which in turn requires a combination of a set number of hands-on work experience hours and a set number of in-class technical training hours. Outside of Red Seal trades, certified workers can only work in their province or territory, which limits their ability to move for work.

CCRW's experience and research identifies **two areas where change is especially urgent: education and testing, and access to funding.**



Education and Testing

Education is key to starting a trades career, but it can be a major challenge. Some apprentices who are highly skilled on the job struggle to complete the classroom-based portion of their training. These challenges are often not due to a lack of ability, but to inflexible systems that fail to accommodate diverse learning needs.

When trades education is designed with accessibility in mind, it becomes more inclusive for everyone.

Key areas for reform include:

- **Applying Universal Design principles** when updating educational curriculum, infrastructure, and technologies.
- **Modernized curriculum** aligned with exams and evolving industry needs, including digital literacy, sustainability practices, and inclusive workplace training.
- **Updated training infrastructure, programs, and facilities** that reflect industry needs and integrate accessibility throughout.
- **Flexible training formats**, including day release, part-time, and online options.
- **Streamlined access to accommodations**, including removing requirements for medical documentation that can create bureaucratic barriers.
- **Wraparound supports** for exam preparation, such as tutoring, stress management, and transportation support to address mental health, financial, and mobility barriers.
- **Accessible testing environments**, including availability of assistive technology.
- **Accessible exam formats**, i.e., screen reader-compatible, large print, plain language, and multi-lingual formats.

Educational barriers reflect a broader pattern in which systems are designed with only one kind of learner in mind. To build an accessible skilled trades sector, regulatory bodies, training providers, and governments must embed accessibility into how we teach, test, and support tradespeople with disabilities.



Promising Practice - Virtual Reality Unlocks New Pathways in Skilled Trades Training

CCRW offers virtual reality (VR) training to persons with disabilities across Canada. While not limited to the trades, this training helps users build confidence and overcome psychological barriers such as interview anxiety and workplace disclosure conversations. By simulating real-world scenarios in a safe and supportive environment, CCRW's VR program supports broader workplace inclusion and readiness.

This same technology is now being harnessed in trades education to fill gaps in technical training, confidence-building, and emotional readiness. VR allows learners safely practice hands-on tasks like welding,⁴⁰ electrical work,⁴¹ and vehicle painting⁴² as many times as needed. Studies show that immersive VR improves procedural and spatial learning compared to traditional or desktop-based methods.⁴³

VR also supports self-paced learning with fewer distractions,⁴⁴ which benefits learners with sensory or learning challenges. As a multi-modal tool, it accommodates visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners in a single environment.^{45,43} It reduces anxiety and increases positive emotions, leading to higher engagement among students.⁴⁵ This is especially helpful for apprentices who feel isolated or deal with mental health challenges.





VR can also expand access to training for rural or remote learners. For schools that are rural or under-resourced, where access to physical equipment or industry-standard facilities may be limited, VR can provide alternative training options.⁴⁴ It can also reduce the need for learners to relocate or travel for training and reduces reliance on expensive materials and physical infrastructure.⁴²

While implementation challenges remain, such as initial equipment costs,⁴⁴ VR represents a promising practice in trades training and education. When thoughtfully implemented, immersive technologies like VR can help reshape trades education in Canada to be more effective, inclusive, and future-ready.



Access to Funding

Financial access is a critical but often overlooked component of inclusion in the skilled trades. The ability to afford training, tools, transportation, and accommodations shapes who enters and succeeds in the trades. As previously discussed, for apprentices with disabilities, these financial pressures are often compounded by systemic gaps in existing funding models, which are not designed with disability inclusion in mind.

A systems-level shift is needed to ensure funding models are responsive to the needs of persons with disabilities.

This could include:

- **The development of targeted disability-inclusive funding**, similar to the Apprenticeship Incentive Grant for Women, which was introduced to address gender-based barriers in the skilled trades in Canada.
- **Upfront subsidies** for accommodations, available to both apprentices and employers.
- **Additional grants or stipends** to offset living and training costs, including costs of transportation and accessible housing.
- **Automatic eligibility** for wraparound supports for underrepresented groups.
- **Expanded employer incentives**, such as tax credits or wage subsidies for hiring workers with disabilities.

By redesigning funding mechanisms to be disability inclusive, we can remove a major barrier to entry and retention in the trades for people with disabilities.



How Can I Help?

Actors across the skilled trades can support reforming structural and policy-related barriers, especially in education and funding.

Governments:

- Incentivize inclusion through targeted funding (e.g., support for SMEs to hire inclusively and/or implement accommodations; development of a disability-specific line of funding for apprentices).
- Expand trades recruitment outreach to underrepresented groups in partnership with community organizations, settlement agencies, and school-based programs.
- Invest in multi-lingual advertising and newcomer-specific navigation supports for programs like Foreign Credential Recognition Program (FCRP) and Red Seal challenge pathways.
- Scale flexible training models to reduce relocation pressure and support income continuity for apprentices with disabilities.
- Mandate accessibility audits for publicly funded trades training institutions.

Employers

- Integrate accessibility into hiring, training, and workplace practices.
- Provide accommodations proactively and equitably, including costed options like assistive technology and low- or no-cost options like flexible scheduling.
- Partner with unions and disability organizations to co-design inclusive hiring and training practices.

Unions

- Collaborate with employers and governments to improve safety and inclusion mandates across job sites.
- Provide legal and advocacy support for apprentices facing discrimination or accommodations delays.

Community Organizations

- Build relationships with other actors in the trades ecosystem to increase reach and capacity for awareness raising activities.
- Develop toolkits for navigating funding and accommodations systems, tailored to apprentices with disabilities and employers.

- **Collect disaggregated data** on disability and other intersectional factors to better identify barriers and track progress.
- **Integrate disability-related indicators into the data collection tools that track trades data**, like the Registered Apprenticeship Information System (RAIS).
- **Find what works** by evaluating the efficacy of disability inclusive interventions in the skilled trades ecosystem.
- **Create channels for knowledge exchange** across employers, unions, educators, and community organizations.
- **Promote the use of disability-appropriate metrics to measure inclusion efforts**, such as retention rates, satisfaction, psychological safety, and accommodation availability and timelines.





Measuring Disability Inclusion in the Trades Workplace



How do we know if a trades workplace is truly inclusive?

Measuring disability inclusion means looking beyond hiring numbers. We need to track how workers with disabilities experience their workplaces and their entire employment journey, from recruitment to retention to advancement.

There are lots of ways employers can collect this data, such as surveys, HR data, and feedback loops with employees.

Consider using indicators to answer questions such as:

-  **Representation:** Are people with disabilities present across roles, levels, and trades?
-  **Retention:** Do workers with disabilities stay in their roles and advance in their careers?
-  **Accommodations:** Are accommodations provided in a timely and efficient manner?
-  **Psychological safety:** Do workers feel safe disclosing their disability and asking for support?
-  **Satisfaction:** Are workers with disabilities experiencing good job fit and satisfaction with their job?
-  **Training and promotion:** Are workers with disabilities accessing and benefitting from training and leadership opportunities?



Data is necessary to benchmark progress. However, persons with disabilities must be involved in designing and implementing the interventions meant to benefit them. This means that we must embed formal mechanisms for feedback and accountability across the ecosystem. This includes:

- **Advisory Roles** for tradespeople with disabilities to shape program design, training, and policy.
- **Participatory Design** approaches that engage workers with disabilities in co-creating solutions.
- **Partnerships with Disability Organizations** to guide inclusive practices and amplify lived experience in the ecosystem.

By embedding learning and feedback into every level of the skilled trades ecosystem, we can ensure that inclusion efforts are grounded in evidence and shaped by those most affected.

How Can I Help?

Actors can support disability inclusion in the skilled trades by improving data and installing feedback loops.

Educational Institutions

- Recognize the prevalence of learning and mental-health related disability among apprentices.
- Train faculty and instructors in inclusive pedagogy and disability awareness.
- Provide streamlined path to accommodations, especially for testing.
- Pilot and scale inclusive instructional formats, including virtual reality and online modules.
- Offer wraparound supports or connect apprentices with organizations that can offer wraparound supports.
- Establish feedback loops with apprentices to continuously improve accessibility in course content and delivery.

Community Organizations

- Act as trusted connectors and advocates between workers with disabilities and other actors in the trades ecosystem.
- Provide culturally responsive education and navigation assistance throughout pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, and employment.
- Offer wraparound supports to workers with disabilities.
- Advocate for policy change based on lived experience, data, and research.
- Support apprentices in navigating bureaucratic systems, including getting documentation for accommodations and funding applications.

A Pivotal **Moment**

The skilled trades are at a pivotal moment. As Canada confronts a growing labour shortage, a focus on building new homes, the demands of the green transition, and rapid technological change, the trades must evolve. Disability inclusion is central to this transformation.

People with disabilities are already part of the trades, yet they remain underrepresented, underserved, and invisible. Systemic barriers across education, employment, policy, and culture continue to limit their access and advancement. But these barriers are not inevitable. They are the result of choices about how we design the systems that comprise the skilled trades ecosystem and imagine who belongs in that ecosystem.

To build an accessible trades sector, we must act across the entire ecosystem. This means shifting the narrative, changing the rules, and embedding learning and feedback into every level of the system. It means centering the voices of tradespeople with disabilities when making the trades more accessible and designing pathways that reflect the diversity of talent and experience they bring.





Endnotes

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