Indigenous Perspectives on Disability and Work:
Promoting Employment Inclusion in Canada

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Indigenous Peoples with disabilities in Canada face profound challenges shaped by colonialism, ableism, and systemic inequities. Indigenous populations have some of the highest disability rates of any demographic in the country, but their experiences remain underrepresented in research, labour market data, disability advocacy spaces, and employment policy design.[1,2] Indigenous populations are also frequently misunderstood in ways that overlook Indigenous cultural definitions of disability, the impacts of colonization, and the distinct structural barriers Indigenous Peoples with disabilities face in both urban and remote communities.[3,4]

In this article, we will explore the concept of Indigenous disability. Indigenous disability refers to the lived experience of Indigenous Peoples, encompassing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, who have physical, mental, emotional, and/or intellectual disabilities. Indigenous conceptions of disability emphasize relationality, or the way in which humans are situated within dense and interconnected relationships with each other and the living world, as well as belonging, and community contribution.[5] These conceptions center Indigenous Peoples' way of living in how disability is defined and understood.

The Indigenous perspective of disability contrasts with Western understandings of disability.[3,4,6] Disability has multiple meanings across Western frameworks, ranging from the medical and biomedical perspective that disability is a deficit within the individual, to the social model perspective that disability is a product of environmental and social barriers.[7] By contrast, many Indigenous worldviews do not separate disability from identity, family, land, or spirit. Instead, variation in body, mind, or spirit is interpreted as part of a person's gifts and purpose; it is not a deficit to be corrected.[8,9]

Disability and Indigeneity intersect to create layered challenges and unique strengths that call for culturally appropriate recognition, support, and advocacy. However, mainstream employment systems are built on colonial and Western disability frameworks that continue to shape employment inequity for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities today. This article will demonstrate that meaningful employment inclusion for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities requires approaches rooted in Indigenous worldviews, cultural safety, and Indigenous self-determination.

This article was made possible through our collaboration with Indigenous Disability Canada (IDC/BCANDS). We gratefully acknowledge their leadership and expertise throughout the entire research and development process. We intend this report to be a resource for employment service practitioners, community organizations, community-based researchers, and employers who are committed to implementing culturally informed and culturally safe practices for supporting Indigenous jobseekers with disabilities. We provide evidence, guidance, and insights from lived experience to support those working toward meaningful employment inclusion for Indigenous jobseekers with disabilities. Specifically, we examine Indigenous perspectives on disability and work; the historical and socioeconomic foundations of labour market inequities; contemporary barriers shaped by systemic discrimination and structural underinvestment; and best practices rooted in Indigenous leadership and community self-determination. At the end of this article, we present the fictional story of Daniel to illustrate some of the shared experiences and lived realities of Indigenous Peoples with disabilities. Daniel's narrative is meant to provide the reader with a tangible example of how cultural safety and Indigenous definitions of work and wellbeing shape employment pathways. Together, these insights show us why employment inclusion requires a shift toward approaches that center Indigenous perspectives and definitions of disability and work.

Photograph by *Disabled And Here*.

Why Worldviews Matter:
Indigenous and Western Understandings of Disability and Work

Western Conceptions of Disability and Work

Western frameworks generally define disability through a medical and productivity-based lens, emphasizing diagnosis and individual functioning.[7,10] Alternatively, many disability rights advocates promote the Western social model of disability, which understands disability as emerging from the interaction between an individual's bodily condition and barriers in society.[11] While the social model opposes medicalized definitions of impairment or deficit, both approaches understand disability as something to be accommodated, and assume that individuals can be categorized as either "disabled" or "non-disabled".[1]

Similarly, Western understandings of work prioritize wage labour, efficiency, independence, and economic output, centering productivity as the primary marker of value and employability.[6] An employee's value is often measured by how quickly and independently they can perform tasks, reinforcing narrow definitions of ability and contribution. This model shapes how employers evaluate workers through resumes, credentials, and performance management goals rooted in Western norms. It also shapes employment programs, which aim to make jobseekers more "competitive" according to those same expectations, often overlooking Indigenous understandings of work and contribution.

Indigenous Conceptions of Disability and Work

Indigenous worldviews understand disability through relationality, and interdependence, as opposed to deficit.[4,6] Differences in body, mind, or spirit are interpreted within relationships to family, land, ancestors, and community, and are often connected to a person's gifts, roles, and responsibilities. In practice, this means variation is considered part of natural diversity, seen through roles that reflect individuals' strengths and relationships rather than their limitations. Many Indigenous languages have no direct translation for "disability," reflecting a worldview in which variation is integrated rather than medicalized.[6]

Indigenous conceptions of work similarly emphasize reciprocity, community contribution, and land-based roles, rather than solely wage labour. Through Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), work is understood as identity- and relationship-based, grounded in the individual's responsibility to land and community wellbeing.[8] This reflects that work is rooted in who a person is and how they relate to others; fulfilling cultural roles, caring for family, honouring land-based responsibilities, and maintaining balance within the community are all viewed as forms of meaningful labour tied to identity, not tasks performed for income. Contribution is defined collectively rather than individually, and value is tied to relational accountability rather than productivity metrics.

Why Understanding Worldviews Matters

For employment practitioners, community organizations, employers, and workers, understanding the different ways in which Indigenous Peoples conceptualize disability and work is essential because they directly shape how Indigenous jobseekers with disabilities experience supports, services, and workplaces. In other words, these different understandings have practical implications. They show up in how Indigenous jobseekers interpret disability-related language, how they interact with programs, how they navigate workplace expectations, and how included they feel within everyday team dynamics.

Photograph by Disabled And Here.

First, Indigenous jobseekers may not identify with Western disability labels, which can feel clinical or imposed, leading to disengagement from services that rely on medicalized terminology.[1,6] Because these labels do not align with relational or identity-based understandings of difference, they can make supports feel misaligned with Indigenous jobseekers' needs, or culturally unsafe.

Second, Western disability frameworks have been used to control or harm Indigenous Peoples through misdiagnosis, institutionalization, and forced sterilization, leading to mistrust of health and employment systems.[12,13] This history informs why, for many jobseekers, engaging with these institutions or disclosing a disability can feel risky.

Third, Western employment systems equate ability with individual productivity, while Indigenous definitions center relational responsibility and community contribution.[8,14] As a result, strengths rooted in community and identity may be overlooked or misread within Western assessment criteria. Therefore, Western frameworks often fail to recognize relational strengths as meaningful forms of capability. Without understanding this, practitioners and employers may misinterpret Indigenous values as lack of readiness, motivation, or "fit." In reality, the perceived mismatch stems from conflicting understandings of contribution and purpose.

Lastly, when services reflect only Western models, they risk reproducing the same colonial assumptions that have historically excluded Indigenous Peoples with disabilities. This can make programs feel culturally unsafe, reinforcing disengagement or mistrust rather than fostering connection. Recognizing Indigenous perspectives is foundational to cultural safety and to support employment pathways rooted in Indigenous self-determination.

Taken together, these differences show that disability and work carry distinct meanings in Indigenous and Western worldviews. When employment systems rely only on Western definitions, they risk overlooking Indigenous strengths and reproducing barriers. Understanding Indigenous perspectives is therefore essential for cultural safety and effective support. These foundational differences also help explain why the lasting impacts of colonization continue to shape Indigenous labour market outcomes today.

The Lasting Impact of
Colonization on Indigenous Work Outcomes

Present-day labour market inequities are tied to a long history of legislated assimilation and cultural suppression of Indigenous Peoples. Colonialism changed Indigenous relationships to land, work, and health. This article does not provide a full history, but it highlights key colonial mechanisms, like the Indian Act, enfranchisement, and residential schools, that laid the foundation for the barriers Indigenous Peoples face in the labour market today.

An Introduction to Settler Colonialism in Canada

Colonization happens when one group uses laws, policies, and force to take land, resources, and power away from another group. In Canada, colonization displaced Indigenous Peoples from their traditional lands, cutting off access to places that were central to culture, food, and identity. While the impact of colonization varies across First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, there were many shared experiences. Cultures were suppressed, with traditional languages, spiritual practices, and knowledge systems actively discouraged, banned, and replaced with European ways of thinking and living. Indigenous governance systems were also ignored or replaced by colonial ones, weakening communities' ability to govern themselves.[15]

Colonization occurs when one group of people takes control over another group's land, resources, and/or way of life, sometimes by legal means and sometimes by force. It can involve settlers moving in, taking land, and creating laws and systems that benefit them while harming the people who originally lived there.

Colonialism occurred and evolved differently across various global contexts. In some contexts, colonialism was a means to extract resources and labour from a group of people. However, scholars have argued that colonialism in Canada is an example of **settler colonialism**, which is a form of colonialism that seeks to eliminate Indigenous Peoples and take their lands[16,17]

The Indian Act: A Tool for Control and Assimilation

The Indian Act, first passed in 1876 and still in effect today, is one of the most powerful tools of colonial control in Canada. It governs nearly every aspect of life for those it defines as "status Indians," including land use, governance, education, and cultural practices. The original purpose of the Indian Act was clear: to eliminate Indigenous culture and Peoples through assimilation.[18] The goal was to transition the young Canadian nation from a 'savage' state—associated with Indigenous Peoples—to a 'civilized' state comprising one Christian community.[15]

One way the Act did this was by defining who was legally considered an "Indian". The original definition from the Act included "any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band," "any child of such person," and "any woman who is or was lawfully married to such person".[19] This imposed definition disrupted traditional systems of kinship and belonging, replacing them with a rigid and patriarchal legal framework that excluded many people, especially women and those who married outside their communities.[20] Those who lost legal status, a process known as enfranchisement, were stripped of their rights, community membership, and access to services.[20]

Enfranchisement was framed as a path to citizenship, but in practice, it divided families and erased cultural identities. Families and communities were fragmented, and many individuals were disconnected from both their cultural roots and the settler systems that rejected them.[15,21]

Residential Schools and their Impacts on Indigenous Education

While the Indian Act imposed assimilation through law, residential schools enforced it through education and child removal policies, reshaping education for Indigenous children as well as family and community life.

Amendments to the Indian Act in 1894 and 1920 required First Nations children to attend residential schools. Residential schools were boarding schools run from the 1880s until the mid-1990s by churches and the government. Children were removed from their families and communities and relocated to the schools, where they were forcibly re-socialized according to European values. They were denied the ability to speak their languages or practice their traditions.

Residential schools have received increasing attention in the media over the last decade due to the deaths of children who were forcibly taken into these institutions and the enduring negative impacts on survivors and Indigenous communities. The schools themselves were mismanaged and under-funded. Children endured racism, poor educational services, mistreatment, neglect, and abuse.[15,22] Many left with little formal education, significant trauma, and diminished trust in public institutions, setting in motion cycles of marginalization that persist across generations. These intergenerational effects continue to shape access to culturally safe learning environments, labour market participation, and overall wellbeing in Indigenous communities.

How Colonization Impacts Labour Market Outcomes Today

Photograph by Chris Allen

The impacts of colonialism are intergenerational and continue to influence education and employment outcomes for Indigenous Peoples across Canada today. Mechanisms like the Indian Act and the residential school system did not just remove people from their land or children from their families. They fractured the community-based structures that supported identity, knowledge transmission, and collective wellbeing. These disruptions have created enduring conditions that shape labour market outcomes for Indigenous Peoples today.

One of the lasting effects of the residential school system is the erosion of educational opportunities. Residential schools operated until very recently, with the last school closing in 1996. Many of today's Indigenous leaders, educators, parents, and grandparents are themselves survivors of this system.[23] Education is one of the most significant factors influencing employment outcomes for Indigenous Peoples.[24] The poor-quality education experienced by survivors created the conditions for low educational attainment, chronic unemployment, underemployment, poverty,[25] and intergenerational trauma.[26] The children and grandchildren of survivors inherit this legacy.[25]

The case of residential schools offers a clear example of how colonial policies produced the socioeconomic conditions that underpin present-day inequities. Displacement, assimilation, and child removal policies fractured the social and economic foundations of Indigenous communities. These conditions weakened the systems that are critical to employment inclusion today, such as family, education, governance, and health. Moreover, these foundations have contributed to enduring structural racism within education and employment systems, where Indigenous Peoples continue to face discrimination and exclusion.

Barriers to **Inclusion**

As we have discussed, the legacy of colonialism continues to perpetuate labour market exclusion for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities. Institutionalized ableism and racism, structural inequities and socioeconomic marginalization, and deeply engrained cultural attitudes and stigmas create barriers to accessing meaningful work.

Institutional and Structural Barriers

The long-term effects of colonial policies, such as the residential school system, have contributed to the socioeconomic conditions that shape present-day employment inequities for Indigenous Peoples. These impacts are visible in limited access to diverse, stable, and culturally grounded employment opportunities within many communities.

In numerous First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, employment barriers reflect systemic underinvestment and structural constraints. Obstacles include limited local employers, inadequate transportation, shortages of childcare, housing insecurity, shortages of training or mentorship opportunities, and a lack of culturally relevant workplace environments that reflect Indigenous cultural understandings of work.[27] These barriers are often compounded for persons with disabilities.

Data Gaps and Misrepresentation in National Surveys

The lack of accurate and inclusive data on Indigenous disability amplifies systemic employment exclusion by shaping how policies are designed and resources allocated.

Canadian national surveys do not always present disability data that is disaggregated by Indigenous status or other sociodemographic markers.[28] Many Indigenous communities have had to collect their own data using Indigenous methodologies, but this data is often dismissed because it is qualitative rather than quantitative. Even when Indigenous-led data is quantitative, such as the Remoteness Quotient Report (which we discuss in more detail below), it is often overlooked due to jurisdictional barriers and a longstanding devaluation of Indigenous data sovereignty.

In general, accessing accurate Indigenous data remains a major challenge due to fragmentation, missing information, and jurisdictional neglect. As the First Nations Financial Management Board notes, Indigenous data are spread across government departments. Data sets that exist are often

incomplete or outdated. As a result, accurate and reliable data are not fully accessible to Indigenous governments, undermining planning and accountability.[2] The consequences are serious: despite decades of increased spending, many socioeconomic outcomes remain unchanged, underscoring the necessity of high-quality, Indigenous-governed data to inform effective employment strategies.

Environmental and Contextual Barriers

Geographic and Technological Barriers in Remote Communities

Many Indigenous communities are in remote or rural areas, where access to employment opportunities, training programs, and support services is limited.[29,30] These geographic barriers are compounded by technological inequities, such as unreliable internet access or lack of digital infrastructure.

These challenges not only limit access to mainstream employment but also undermine self-determined economic development. Addressing these barriers requires investment in infrastructure, as well as support for community-based employment models that reflect Indigenous values and priorities.

Unique Barriers in Off-Reserve and Urban Employment

When meaningful work is unavailable locally, community members may need to pursue employment outside their home communities. This can lead to cultural and geographic displacement and limit access to family, land-based practices, and community supports – factors closely tied to wellness, identity, and workforce participation.[27]

Indigenous individuals seeking employment off-reserve often face a different set of challenges. While Canadian data collection with Indigenous communities is imperfect, national labour force data nonetheless indicates that Indigenous workers remain overrepresented in lower-paid, physically demanding, or insecure jobs, and continue to experience racism and discrimination in hiring, retention, and advancement.[31] These inequities reflect long-standing patterns in how opportunities are distributed.

For Indigenous Peoples with disabilities, these challenges can be compounded by inaccessible workplaces, inflexible job structures, and limited accommodation supports, making it more difficult to secure or maintain stable employment.

Access to Education, Training, and Community Resources

## Barriers in Accessing Education and Training Pathways

Barriers to accessing quality education and vocational training include inaccessible curricula, lack of culturally relevant supports, and systemic underfunding of Indigenous education. As Ineese-Nash (2020) notes,[6] Indigenous children are overrepresented in special education programs, often without adequate cultural or community-based input in their assessments and placements.
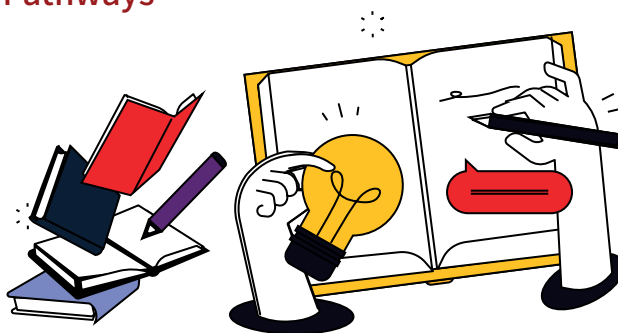
Accessibility and Accommodation Gaps in Mainstream Employment Programs

Mainstream employment services frequently fail to provide adequate accommodations or culturally appropriate support. Programs are often designed around rigid Western frameworks that do not account for Indigenous definitions of work, wellness, or success. As we have discussed, Indigenous worldviews tend to prioritize relationality and community contribution, and these values are often invisible in mainstream measures of employability.

Moreover, the lack of flexibility in these programs can deter participation. For example, pre-set treatment or training plans may not align with Indigenous approaches to healing and learning, which are often holistic and adaptive.[14]
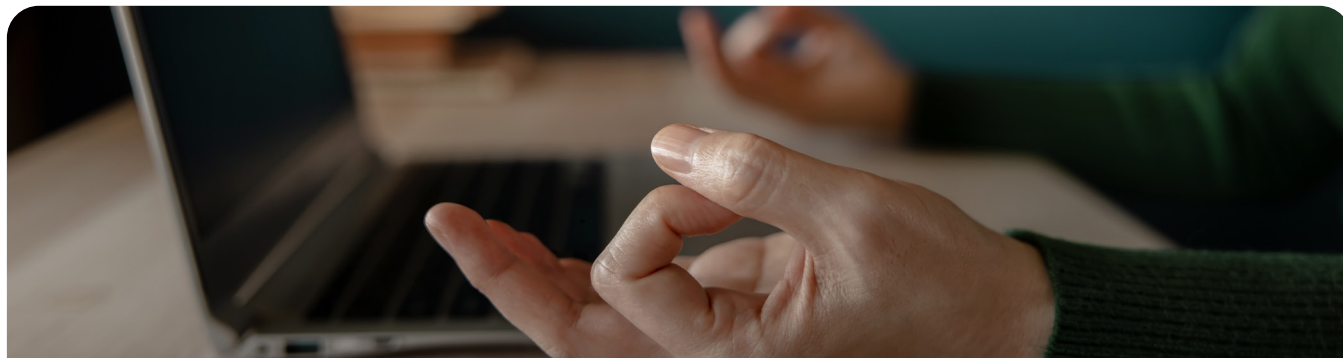
Cultural and Attitudinal Barriers

Indigenous Peoples with disabilities often face intersecting forms of discrimination in hiring processes and workplaces, including racism, ableism, and colonial bias. These biases are embedded in institutional structures that prioritize Western norms of productivity and communication, often excluding Indigenous ways of being and knowing.[9]

The concept of the "perfect employee" in colonial frameworks creates unrealistic expectations, discouraging disclosure of disabilities and reinforcing mistrust. Employment environments should be proactively structured to support all workers, recognizing all disabilities (including non-apparent and episodic disabilities) without forcing disclosure.


Additionally, due to a legacy of colonialism, forced assimilation, and systemic neglect, many Indigenous communities experience deep mistrust toward institutions, including employment services. This mistrust is compounded when services are not Indigenous-led or fail to reflect Indigenous values and knowledge systems. As Velarde (2018) discusses,[9] when Indigenous worldviews are dismissed or mistranslated, it reinforces oppression and leads to disengagement. Participants in Durst et al.'s research (2006)[1] expressed that being labeled or treated as "disabled" by outsiders felt alienating, undermined their autonomy and identity, and often felt like a continuation of colonial control rather than support. This reinforces the need for culturally safe, community-driven employment initiatives.

This mistrust is further compounded by experiences of exploitation through research practices. Indigenous scholars and communities have documented how data has been extracted without consent, used to reinforce stereotypes, or ignored altogether. Additionally, while academic literature on Indigenous understandings of work and disability remains limited, this is not due to a lack of community knowledge. Rather, community-led evidence, often shared through oral histories, lived experiences, and Indigenous methodologies, has historically been undervalued or excluded from mainstream research systems.

Photograph by _Disabled And Here._

Best **Practices**

Indigenous workers with disabilities face multiple layers of marginalization: systemic ableism in settler workplaces, conflicts between Western work norms and Indigenous worldviews, and the erosion of community-based roles that once supported diverse forms of contribution. Employment service providers, employers, and community organizations can help strengthen employment inclusion for Indigenous workers with disabilities through decolonized, culturally grounded approaches to employment and disability inclusion that honour Indigenous definitions of work, wellness, and capability.
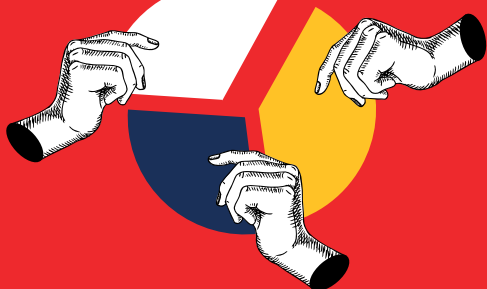
These practices reinforce what Indigenous communities, organizations, and disability advocates across Canada have long emphasized: effective employment pathways must be culturally grounded, community-led, and holistic.

Employers

Culturally Safe Workplaces

Developing culturally safe and accessible workplaces is essential for improving employment outcomes for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities. The National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH) emphasizes that cultural safety goes beyond 'cultural awareness' or 'cultural sensitivity'.[32] Employers must examine power imbalances, confront systemic racism, and create environments where Indigenous Peoples feel respected and safe to express their identities without discrimination.[32]

Why Cultural Safety Matters

Indigenous employees experience higher rates of discrimination and workplace exclusion stemming from anti-Indigenous and disability-related discrimination, and these experiences are often magnified for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities.[33,34] According to NCCIH,[32] culturally safe environments require organizations to:

- · Address power differentials that shape workplace relationships;
- · Actively confront racism and colonial bias embedded in workplace norms;
- · Promote cultural humility, including ongoing self-reflection from employers and supervisors;
- · Ensure that Indigenous Peoples define what safety means, not institutions.

For Indigenous workers with disabilities, cultural safety also includes accounting for and understand the intersections of colonial trauma, general disability stigma, and systemic barriers.

Employer-Community Partnerships

Strong and long-term partnerships between employers and Indigenous communities are essential for improving employment inclusion for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities. Effective partnerships are based on relationships instead of transactions and must support Indigenous communities' rights to self-determination and leadership over the design of employment pathways.

The NCCIH emphasizes that culturally safe systems must be co-created with Indigenous communities, not designed by external institutions.[32] Research consistently shows that Indigenous workers have better employment outcomes when training programs and workplace arrangements are developed collaboratively with Indigenous communities or Indigenous-led organizations.[35,36] Partnerships not only build trust between employers and communities, addressing historical and ongoing harms that shape Indigenous workers' experiences of workplaces, but they also ensure employment approaches reflect local cultural contexts and community values.[1,32] Additionally, employer partnerships increase long-term retention and job satisfaction, especially for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities.[35]

Community Organizations and Researchers

Community-Led Research and Data Sovereignty

Colonial institutions have historically failed to recognize Indigenous research methodologies such as oral histories, storytelling, and community knowledge as valid forms of data. Each of these are rigorous approaches to generating knowledge, and they emphasize accountability to Indigenous communities and ancestors, ensuring the benefit of community engagement as well as reciprocity.[37] Extractive research practices (i.e., those where academics and institutions collect information from Indigenous communities without reciprocity or community participation) have contributed to deep mistrust of research and data collection.[37,38] This mistrust is particularly evident in disability research, where Western medical approaches have often labeled Indigenous Peoples as 'abnormal' or misunderstood their experiences outside of cultural context.[1,6] Indigenous-led and community-based research positions Indigenous Peoples not as subjects of research, but as rights holders with jurisdiction over their own knowledge systems.

Indigenous data sovereignty recognizes methodologies such as storytelling, spiritual teachings, and cultural expressions as meaningful and actionable forms of information.[39,40] The OCAP principles – Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession – developed by the First Nations Information Governance Centre, are foundational to Indigenous data governance and advocate for full community authority over how data is collected, interpreted, and applied.[39,41] Conversely, federal datasets such as the Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) and the Labour Force Survey (LFS) often lack appropriate disaggregation, cultural relevance, and representative sampling of Indigenous communities across Canada.

What is the Remoteness Quotient Report?

The use of tools like the Remoteness Quotient Report by the Nishnawbe Aski Nation demonstrate how Indigenous-led data can drive equitable funding and policy reform.

Developed by the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the Remoteness Quotient Report (RQR) measures the degree of remoteness for northern and fly-in First Nations by combining community-defined indicators such as transportation barriers, cost-of-living differences, infrastructure limits, and seasonal access.[42]

The tool translates community-defined realities into quantitative data used to advocate for more equitable funding models that reflect the real costs of service delivery in remote Indigenous communities.[43,44] It is an example of how Indigenous-governed data can improve equity in federal resource allocation.[40]
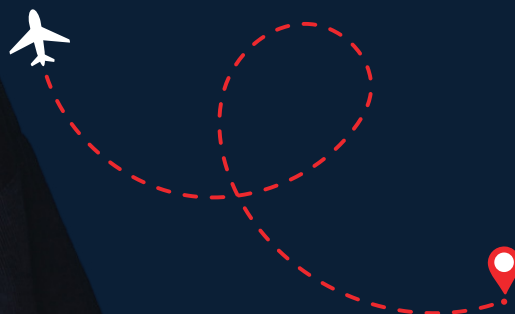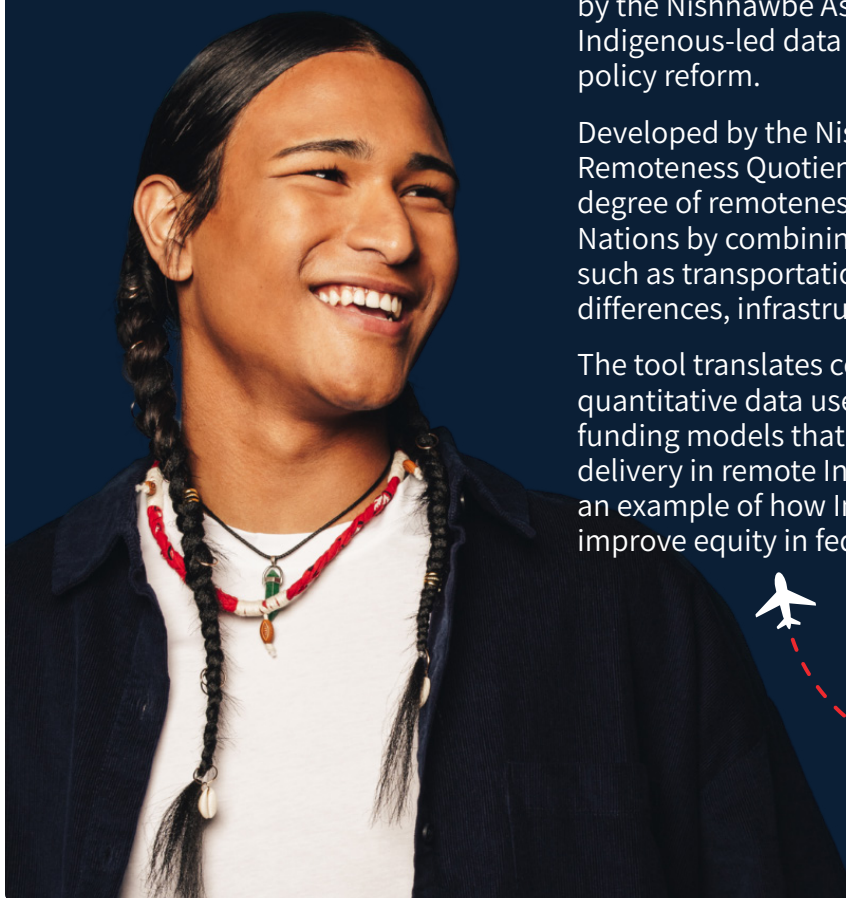
Due to the limited availability of academic literature on Indigenous disability and work – particularly in Canada – grey literature, Indigenous-authored blogs, and community narratives are essential sources for understanding Indigenous perspectives. These forms of knowledge reflect lived realities that are often missing from peer-reviewed studies. Citation chaining (i.e., finding additional literature by searching the sources referenced within a work) within Indigenous scholarship, community-based research, and Indigenous-led organizations such as IDC/BCANDS, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and Métis Nation research units can help build a more complete and culturally grounded evidence base. Put together, these practices ensure that research on Indigenous Peoples with disabilities accurately reflects community definitions of disability, capability, work, and wellbeing.
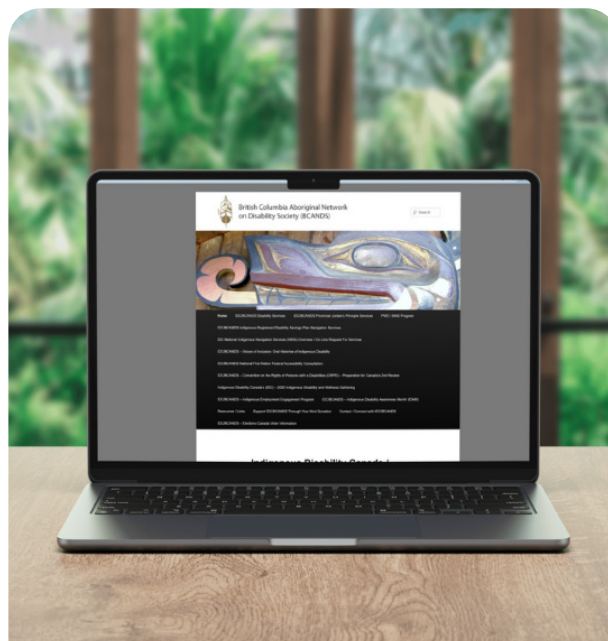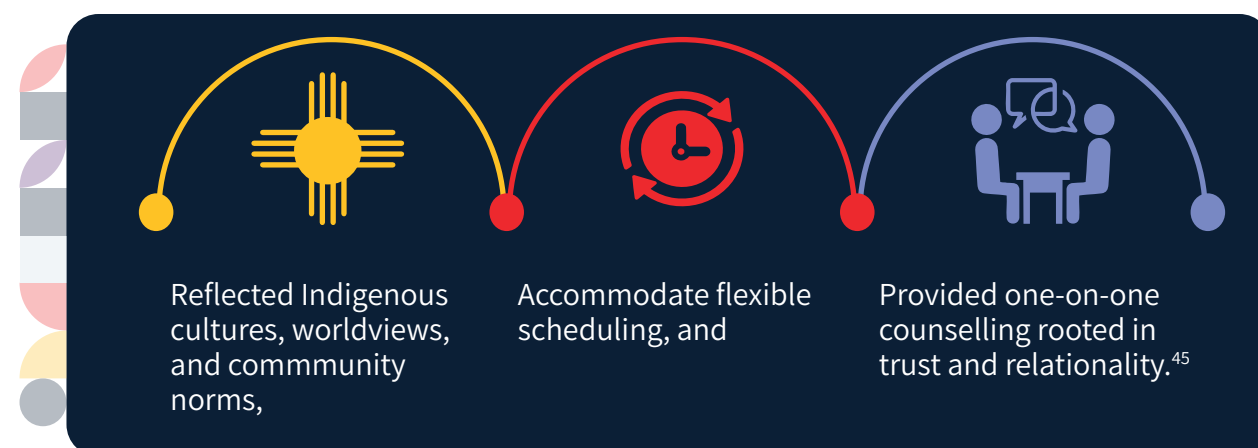
Employment Services Providers

Community-Driven Program Design and Indigenous Leadership

As we have discussed throughout this report, Indigenous self-determination is not simply a best practice but a precondition for meaningful and sustainable outcomes. This includes in designing and implementing employment programs and other community resources.

Evaluations of Canada's Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) show that employment programs work best when they are planned and delivered in partnership with Indigenous communities, rather than imposed through standardized models. Programs that involved Elders, community organizations, local employers, and families were more successful and more trusted by Indigenous Peoples with disabilities.[35]

Culturally Adapted, Individualized Employment Supports

Indigenous Peoples with disabilities in Canada experience overlapping barriers that require supports tailored to the individual and their community context. A report highlights that ASETS participants had better outcomes when employment programming:

Reflected Indigenous cultures, worldviews, and community norms,

Accommodate flexible scheduling, and

Provided one-on-one counselling rooted in trust and relationality.[45]

This mirrors the cultural realities previously discussed, particularly the understanding that Indigenous Peoples often conceptualize disability differently and may not identify with Western diagnostic labels. Tailoring supports to Indigenous definitions of ability, wellbeing, and community roles helps bridge this conceptual divide.

Holistic and Integrated Supports: Connecting Health, Disability, and Employment Services

Indigenous Peoples with disabilities face not only labour market exclusion but also gaps in health services, disability supports, and accessible education. Employment success therefore depends on integrated, wraparound services that address these interconnected needs.[45]

In Canada, Indigenous jobseekers with disabilities often relocate to urban centres to access services, leading to isolation and decreased cultural supports.[46] Programs that coordinate across healthcare, disability assessment, mental health, and employment services reduce this fragmentation and honour a more holistic Indigenous view of wellbeing.

Place-Based Supports That Respect Geography and Community Ties

Access to services often requires travel or relocation. Many Indigenous Peoples with disabilities experience compounded barriers when they must leave their communities. Mobility challenges, disconnection from land, and loss of family supports negatively impact employment readiness.[45,46]

Best practices emphasize delivering services in or near Indigenous communities; mobile or remote supports where in-person models are not feasible; and building local capacity so services do not rely solely on urban providers. These implementations align with Indigenous definitions of work, identity, and wellbeing that are intimately tied to land, community, and place.

Daniel's Journey

Daniel is a Métis man in his late 30s living in a large urban centre. In his twenties, Daniel was diagnosed by a physician with major depressive disorder. He still experiences periods of low mood and fatigue on-and-off, but he has usually avoided disclosing this in workplace settings. The diagnosis of depression felt clinical and alienating to Daniel. To him, mental health was deeply intertwined with his relationships to family, community, and culture. What doctors labelled as "symptoms" felt more like natural responses to disconnection and unresolved trauma. For example, when a previous employer required Daniel to relocate nearly eight hours away from his home community in Sault Ste. Marie for work, the separation from family and cultural supports had a significant impact on his wellbeing. Rather than being recognized as a contextual and relational challenge, his declining mental health was treated as an individual issue to be managed privately.

Daniel works in the field of logistics and has experience in warehouse coordination and inventory management, which he gained through post-secondary training and several years of contract and full-time roles. However, his employment history includes short-term positions and gaps that employers often interpret as unreliability, rather than as the result of episodic health needs and inflexible work environments. In past workplaces, rigid attendance policies and narrow productivity expectations left little room for flexibility. Concerned about stigma and retaliation, Daniel pushed himself to meet expectations, often at the expense of his wellbeing, leading to burnout and repeated job loss.

Daniel's experience shifted when he connected with an Indigenous-led employment service grounded in relational practice and cultural safety. Importantly, Daniel wasn't asked to provide "proof" of his disability. Instead of centering his medical diagnosis, staff focused on understanding his strengths, priorities, and preferred working conditions. Employment planning was collaborative and paced, recognizing that stability and trust were foundational to long-term success.

With this support, Daniel secured a logistics coordination role with a mid-sized distribution company. The employer worked with the Indigenous-led employment service to design the role in a way that reflected Indigenous understandings of wellbeing as relational and place-based. Flexibility was built into the role to support Daniel's connection to family and community, including predictable scheduling, flexible start times, and the ability to adjust hours during periods of low energy or when community responsibilities arose. Rather than treating these needs as exceptional, the employer understood them as essential to sustaining Daniel's capacity to work. Importantly, accommodations were introduced without Daniel requiring to repeatedly justify or medicalize his needs. Ongoing follow-up from the employment service supported both Daniel and the workplace as needs shifted over time. This continuity helped prevent burnout and allowed challenges to be addressed early. As a result, Daniel was able to sustain employment and contribute his skills without suppressing his identity or wellbeing.

Although Daniel is not a real person, many Indigenous Peoples with disabilities experience similar journeys. This story illustrates how culturally safe, Indigenous-led employment supports can address the compounded effects of colonial trauma, disability stigma, and rigid workplace norms. When employment systems prioritize relational practice and Indigenous self-determination, they create conditions for meaningful and sustained participation in work.

Daniel's story demonstrates that when employment supports embrace cultural safety, relational practice, flexibility, and Indigenous leadership, the outcomes extend beyond job placement. They contribute to healing, self-determination, and the rebuilding of trust in systems that have historically excluded Indigenous Peoples with disabilities. His experience offers powerful illustration that the best practices are not abstract recommendations. They are living, practical approaches that change lives when implemented in partnership with Indigenous communities.

Conclusion

The experiences and insights presented throughout this article reveal a consistent truth: employment inclusion for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities cannot be achieved through mainstream frameworks built on Western assumptions of productivity, independence, and deficit. Colonial systems – through the Indian Act, residential schools, land dispossession, and ongoing structural neglect – continue to shape the conditions under which Indigenous Peoples seek work, access services, and define wellbeing. These systems have not only produced the barriers seen today but have also obscured Indigenous ways of knowing that offer more holistic, relational understandings of disability, work, and human value.

Yet Daniel's story demonstrates the strength and possibility that emerge when supports are grounded in cultural safety, relational practice, and Indigenous definitions of wellness and contribution. Pathways to change require Indigenous-led, culturally grounded, and holistic approaches that address not only employment barriers but also the wider, social, historical, and structural determinants of inequality explored throughout this article. These practices support a broader shift from viewing employment as a narrow, economic activity, to understanding it as connected to community, identity, culture, and self-determination. This ensures that work is relational, purposeful, and embedded within community wellbeing rather than individual productivity alone.

Looking to the future, meaningful employment inclusion requires listening to Indigenous communities, honouring Indigenous knowledge systems, and redesigning employment structures to reflect the relational, land-based, and community-centred ways Indigenous Peoples understand work and capability. When employment systems shift from assimilation to affirmation, they do more than create jobs. They foster healing, restore autonomy, and support the coexistence of Indigenous economies and identities.
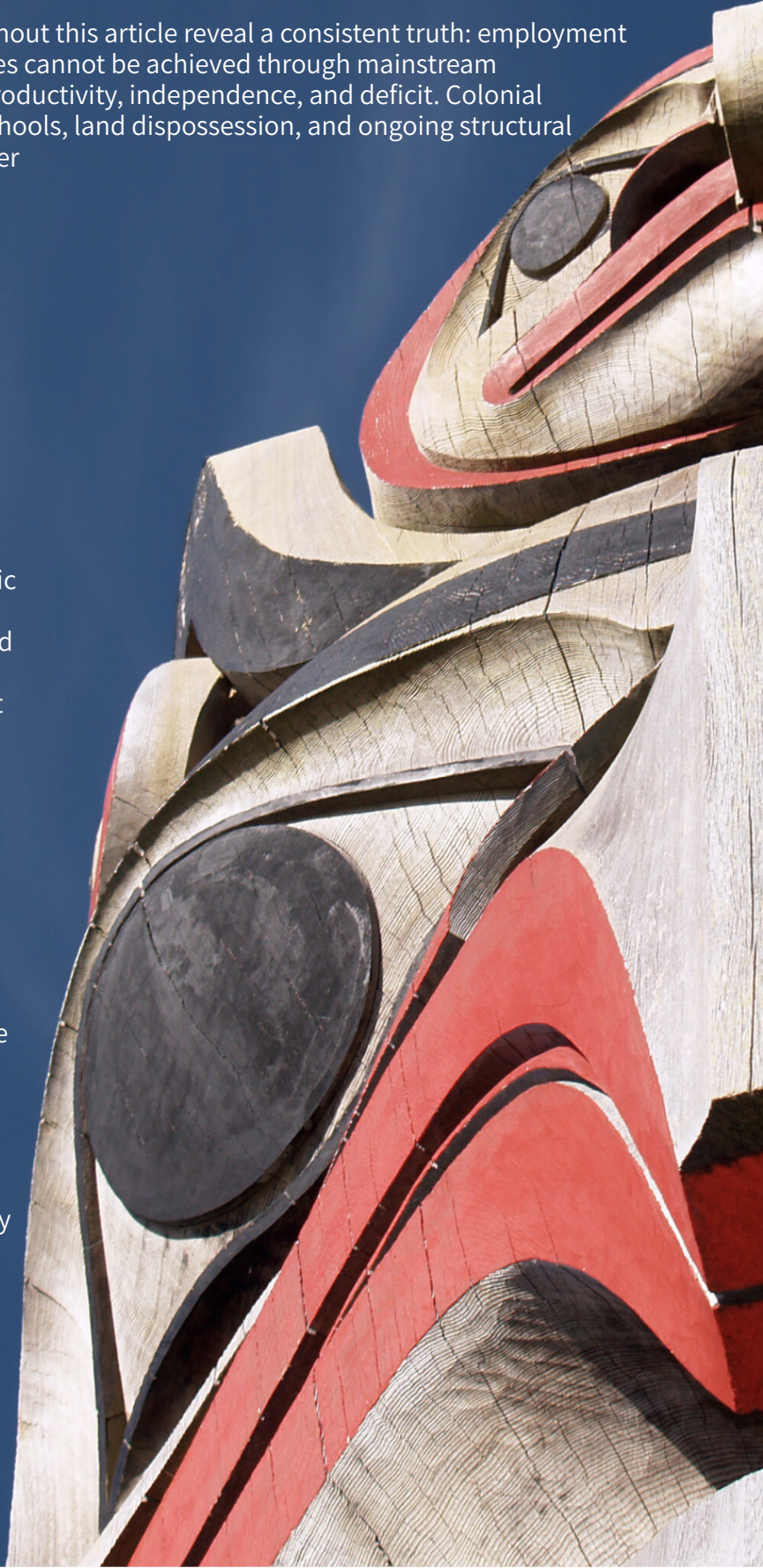
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