Background Document

Introduction

Persons with disabilities account for a large untapped talent pool in the Canadian labour market. In 2017, 3,727,920 Canadians between the ages of 25 and 64 identified as having a disability. Only three in five (59%) of these individuals were employed. Of those who were not employed, nearly 645,000 (40%) had paid work potential but were unable to find suitable work. While there is significant evidence of benefits to companies from inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workforce, many still struggle to find a job, and access meaningful employment opportunities that utilize their skillsets.

We know the future competitiveness of our country depends on engaging all our intellectual capital and enabling more persons with disabilities to be full participants in our economy is not just a positive gesture, it’s good for businesses and for Canadian economic growth. However, many employers are hesitant to hire persons with disabilities due to biased beliefs and stereotypes about disability. As described in research conducted by MaRS with support from CIBC, each phase of the recruitment process comes with its own set of barriers, from the job posting through to the interview process. 51% of participants with disabilities responding to CIBC’s consumer market research panel survey reported having difficulties finding meaningful employment. Moreover, 22% of respondents experienced discrimination and prejudice in the job application process and 21% in the interview process.

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1 Morris et al., "A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017" (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2018)
2 Ibid. Note: having "work potential" is defined by Statistics Canada as persons with disability not currently working, not currently in school, not housebound and no preventions from working. They stress that it is not an attempt to measure an individual’s capacity or ability to work, but a way to examine how the labour market could change in a more inclusive market. For more, see StatsCan’s Annex A: Work Potential.
3 Jerdee, Chad. 2019. ‘What companies gain by including persons with disabilities’. April 23.
6 Ibid.
Why address this problem now?

As of April 2020, 5.5 million Canadian workers experienced either job loss and significantly reduced hours due to COVID-19.\(^7\) On top of existing barriers to employment\(^8\), persons with disabilities are more likely to experience difficulties finding and returning to work during COVID-19 recovery.\(^9\) Statistics Canada reported that one-third (36\%) of their respondents with long-term conditions or disabilities reported experiencing temporary or permanent job loss or reduced hours during the pandemic.\(^10\) Additionally, respondents who reported multiple long-term conditions were more likely (41\%) to report a temporary or permanent job loss or a reduction in hours since March compared with those who reported one long-term condition (31\%).\(^11\)

COVID-19 has brought less visible problems into view—such as inequalities in the labor market regarding income and working conditions.\(^12\) A survey conducted on behalf of BC Workforce Innovation (BC Win) found that employers are more hesitant to hire persons with disabilities in the current climate.\(^13\)

Moreover, COVID-19 may cause individuals to develop disabilities including breathing problems, mobility limitations from fatigue, and neurological and sleeping difficulties. Canadian employers may not be ready for the influx of people temporarily or permanently disabled from COVID-19.\(^14\)

Changes made to enable work during the pandemic have been a large step forward in terms of access to employment for persons with disabilities. The adoption of virtual recruiting and broader acceptance of remote and flexible work arrangements are just some of these practices that increase disability inclusion.\(^15\) However, significant room for improvement remains during this time of unprecedented change. Now is the time for bold solutions that will transform access to meaningful employment for persons with disabilities.

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Problems identified by the community

In the first phase of the Inclusive Design Challenge, which occurred in early 2021, MaRS and CIBC asked persons with disabilities and allies to share barriers to finding meaningful employment they had seen, heard or experienced. Key areas of focus pertaining to finding employment or pathways to career entry are highlighted below:

Problems Identified:
*Problems identified with a '*' were identified as a priority to address by the disability community. Solutions addressing these areas will be awarded additional points in the Challenge evaluation process.

Attitudinal Bias*

Definition
Pervasive myths that people have about persons with disabilities that result in negative attitudes or assumptions about their ability to work.

Impact on finding employment
Persons with disabilities face stigma and discrimination with regards to their physical and cognitive capabilities, potential performance, importance, and perceived ability. Biases are entrenched in hiring practices and can be very difficult to change.

Quote: “My physical disability does not affect my mental capacity to complete tasks. The perception that I am less productive and more costly to accommodate is a barrier to me finding meaningful work.”

Disclosure*

Definition
Process in which individuals decide when and if they will disclose their disability to their employer in the application process, and the implications of this decision.

Impact on finding employment
When filling out an application, persons with disabilities need to decide whether or not to disclose their disability. The voluntary disability disclosure section on job applications is listed as a binary “yes/no” and does not include a section for additional context. The fear of disclosing is common among persons with disabilities as it carries potential for discrimination and even being screened-out of the recruitment process.

Quote: “Our resumes are usually overlooked right away when noticed the mention of ‘disability’ because HR does not understand the ability and capability of the disability in question. I obtained my first job after sending out over 230 resumes.”
“One-size-fits-all” recruitment process*

**Definition**
Organizational hiring processes may be the same for all candidates which put persons with disabilities at a disadvantage.

**Impact on finding employment**
Employers may use the same recruitment process for all candidates, which does not consider how people with certain types of disabilities may be negatively impacted. Hiring practices that use artificial intelligence (AI) to sort through candidates may automatically eliminate persons with disabilities through biased systems and discriminatory processes. Some of these standardized requirements include in-person or virtual interviews, or the completion of standardized tests. In addition, job seekers requiring accommodations or ASL interpreters for an interview may be required to make these arrangements themselves.

**Quote**
“While many corporations are advocating for equal opportunities for those with disabilities, they're making it difficult for people with disabilities to even apply due to the structure of their hiring process.”

Inaccessible job postings

**Definition**
External job advertisements may not be accessible to persons with disabilities.

**Impact on finding employment**
Complex language, small fonts, and the lack of adherence to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) in job postings disproportionately impacts individuals with intellectual or visual disabilities. Furthermore, the use of ableist words, or words that discriminate in favour of persons without disabilities can discourage qualified people from applying.

**Quote**
“Job postings are often intimidating by their length, and list of responsibilities.”
Complex previous experience

**Definition**
Employers looking to hire new personnel may not understand or acknowledge the gaps in experience on the resume of persons with disabilities.

**Impact on finding employment**
Many persons with disabilities have large gaps in their resumes due to accidents, surgeries, short- and long-term disability leaves, rehabilitation, etc. The way resumes are typically structured focuses on credentials and experience, without leaving space to elaborate or explain one’s story. These gaps create uncertainty and skepticism for hiring managers and human resources when reviewing an application. As a result, persons with disabilities struggle to pass the pre-screening phase. Moreover, when organizations use AI hiring tools that automatically sort through applications, subjective complex previous experiences are not considered which may result in persons with disabilities to be further excluded.

*Quote:* “With an increasing reliance on technology in streamlining processes in various industries, it is important to make sure that disadvantaged groups are able to be given the right resources to succeed like everyone else.”

Overqualification

**Definition**
Persons with disabilities may apply to jobs they are overqualified for due to a lack of skill recognition and disability-based stigma. From the perspective of these individuals, this is due to their preference to be underemployed rather than unemployed.

**Impact on finding employment**
Despite being overqualified, persons with disabilities are often overlooked for open roles. Participants believe that this is due in part to the employer assuming they lack ambition or would get bored in the position, and to the perception that entry-level jobs are ‘reserved’ for younger candidates.

*Quote:* “I have been unemployed long enough that I see [a job that I am overqualified for] as a last resort. I need this job to pay my bills and to feed myself. I used to think that applying to these types of roles was demoralizing, but I have now accepted that I have to do this current job for survival.”
**Next steps:**

Participate in the MaRS and CIBC Inclusive Design Challenge by submitting a solution to support accessible career entry for persons with disabilities.

Participants must the following options before the deadline of **June 30, 2021 11:59pm ET:**

1. Participate on the [Inclusive Design Challenge website](mailto:challenges@marsdd.com).
2. Send an email to [challenges@marsdd.com](mailto:challenges@marsdd.com) with an attached audio or video file answering the submission questions.
3. Mail your answers to the submission questions to:

   MaRS Discovery District
   101 College Street, Suite 100
   Toronto ON M5G 1L7
   ATTN: Louise Pichette - Inclusive Design Challenge

**Contact us at challenges@marsdd.com or 416-673-8100 if you require another submission format.**

**For more information, see:**

- The MaRS and CIBC Inclusive Design Challenge: [Research Report](mailto:challenges@marsdd.com)
- [Challenge overview](mailto:challenges@marsdd.com)
- [Glossary of terms](mailto:challenges@marsdd.com)
- [Helpful resources](mailto:challenges@marsdd.com)
- [Contest rules](mailto:challenges@marsdd.com)