



SKILLSNEXT

**Skills Gaps,
Underemployment, and
Equity of Labour-Market
Opportunities for Persons
with Disabilities in Canada**

JANUARY 2020

**Emile Tompa, Daniel Samosh
& Normand Boucher**





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The word "Canada" in a serif font, with a small Canadian flag icon integrated into the letter 'a'.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Project	iv
About the Authors.....	v
Executive Summary	vii
Introduction.....	1
A Profile of Disability in Canada.....	3
Defining Disability	3
The Prevalence of Disability.....	4
Disability and Intersectionality.....	7
Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities.....	8
Employment Outcomes of Persons with Disabilities.....	8
Education and the Disability Skills Gap.....	11
Employment Experiences While in School.....	13
Training Opportunities for Older Workers with Disabilities.....	14
Barriers in the Employment Relationship.....	15
Discrimination and Failure to Accommodate.....	16
Disability Confidence	17
Self-Employment.....	18
Public Sector and Services Provider Roles	19
Public Sector.....	19
Services Providers.....	19
Support Systems	20
Next Steps.....	21
References	23

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Canadians' needs for skills training are changing rapidly. Through Skills Next, the Public Policy Forum and the Diversity Institute—in its role as a research lead for the Future Skills Centre—are publishing a series of reports that explore a number of the most important issues currently impacting the skills ecosystem in Canada. Each report focuses on one issue, reviews the existing state of knowledge on this topic, and identifies areas in need of additional research. This strong foundation is intended to help support further research and strengthen policymaking. A diverse set of authors who are engaged in the skills ecosystem through various roles, including through research, activism and policymaking, have been carefully selected to provide a broad range of perspectives while also foregrounding the Canadian context. Their varied backgrounds, experiences and expertise have shaped their individual perspectives, their analyses of the current skills ecosystem, and the reports they have authored.

Skills Next includes reports focused on:

- **Global comparison of trends to understand the future of skills;**
- **Knowns and unknowns about skills in labour market information;**
- **Rethinking the relationship between technology and the future of work;**
- **Defining digital skills and the pathways to acquiring them;**
- **Barriers to employment for immigrants and racialized people in Canada;**
- **Barriers to employment for persons with disabilities;**
- **The return on investment of industry leadership in skills and training; and**
- **Approaches to improving the transitions of university graduates from education to the workforce.**



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



EMILE TOMPA

Dr. Emile Tompa is a senior scientist at the Institute for Work & Health and associate professor in the Department of Economics at McMaster University. He is co-director of the Centre for Research on Work Disability Policy (CRWDP), an initiative funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Tompa is an associate editor for BMC Public Health, and is on the editorial board of the Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation and the Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment and Health. He has an MBA from the University of British Columbia, an MA in economics from the University of Toronto, and a PhD in economics from McMaster University. Tompa's current research agenda is centred on labour-market experiences and their health and human development consequences; policy analysis of occupational health and safety and work disability prevention systems; and the evaluation of workplace interventions directed at improving the health of workers. He was previously a member of the Advisory Committee for the Ontario Centre for Workforce Innovation and currently sits on the National Stakeholder Advisory Panel for the Labour Market Information Council.



DANIEL SAMOSH

Daniel is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the Centre for Research on Work Disability Policy and the Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources at the University of Toronto. He received his PhD in Organizational Behaviour from Queen's University, his MSc in Strategy from Queen's University, and his HBA from the Richard Ivey School of Business at Western University. Daniel's research portfolio focuses on disability and work. For his doctoral research, he employed qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the career advancement and leadership of persons with disabilities.



NORMAND BOUCHER

Normand Boucher is a sociologist and political scientist and is currently a researcher at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Rehabilitation and Social Integration (CIRRS) and an adjunct professor in the School of Social Work and Criminology at Université Laval. Over the last 20 years, he has developed research projects in the field of disability policies focusing in particular on work and employment, support services, social policies and compensation of additional costs related to disability issues. During that period, he has been involved with many research teams active at national and international levels. These research activities have allowed him to develop a strong and large expertise regarding disability and work policies and a good understanding of the programmes and compensation measures shaping the Canadian social security system.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One in five Canadians aged 15 years or older—about 6.2 million people—have one or more disabilities. While people with disabilities can achieve socially integrated, financially independent lives through secure, well-paid employment, they are often trapped in low-skill jobs at high risk of automation.

In Canada, persons with disabilities typically earn lower wages and are more precariously employed than the average worker. Among Canadians aged 25 to 64, the rate of poverty is 40 per cent higher for persons with mild disabilities and nearly 200 per cent higher for those with more severe disabilities, than it is for Canadians without disabilities.

Examining the reasons that people with disabilities are underemployed reveals difficulties finding work and, once employed, difficulties requesting and getting the support they need to advance to their careers. Social stigma, a lack of understanding, and a lack of supports at many life stages further compounds the challenges that persons with disabilities face.

In the future of work, these challenges will likely be exacerbated, as jobs where persons with disabilities typically find employment are often at risk of automation – namely low-skilled, low-education jobs. And while some job categories are projected to experience growth in the years to come, such as the managerial and professional categories, persons with disabilities find themselves underrepresented in these “growth” categories.

To eliminate barriers to employment for people with disabilities, employers, policymakers, healthcare workers, educators, architects, and engineers must be educated to develop “disability confidence.”

Disability confident employers have the knowledge to create inclusive and accessible work environments and advocate for social change within and beyond their organizations.

Beyond that, more research is needed to understand issues around disability and employment, including how automation will affect jobs, how employers can support the transition from school to work, and which accommodation practices will help educators and employers make the future world of work more equitable and inclusive.

In particular, research suggests that the transition between school and work appears to be a major challenge for persons with disabilities. Educational institutions and employers could leverage this transition into an opportunity, providing persons with disabilities skills, competencies, and credentials (persons with mild disabilities are already well-educated) to connect into jobs in high growth industries experiencing a need for workers.



Disability confident employers have the knowledge and ability to create inclusive and accessible work environments for their employees as well as their customers



INTRODUCTION

Many countries, including Canada, have marginalized persons with disabilities.¹ This is evident in key social statistics. For instance, more Canadians with disabilities live in poverty (as measured by the market basket measure²) than their counterparts without disabilities. In the core working age range of 25 to 64, more than 28 percent of Canadians with severe disabilities and 14% with milder disabilities live in poverty.³ By contrast, 10 percent of Canadians without disabilities in that same age bracket live in poverty.⁴ (See Table 1 for details on the correlation that exists between disability and poverty.)

Furthermore, Canadians with disabilities often find themselves in entry-level positions characterized by low wages and precarious employment, such as short-term contracts and involuntary part-time work.^{5, 6} Promoting access to secure, well-paid employment is seen by stakeholders as the most promising way to help persons with disabilities achieve socially integrated and financially independent lives.

Table 1: Canadians Living in Poverty, by Age Group, Disability Status and Disability Severity

AGE GROUP	PERSONS WITHOUT DISABILITIES	PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES ⁷	
		Milder	More severe
15 to 24 years	16.7%	22.5%	27.6%
25 to 64 years	10.0%	14.2%	28.3%
65 years and over	6.0%	7.3%	10.4%

Source: Morris et al. (2018) with data from Statistics Canada's Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017.

Paid employment not only offers the possibility of financial security but is also considered an important social role for adults, since it can provide structure, meaning and social support. For many reasons, the

¹ World Health Organization. (2011). [World report on disabilities](#).

² A measure of low income based on a specific basket of goods or services.

³ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See, for example, Tompa, E., et al. (2006). Precarious employment and people with disabilities (90-114). In L. F. Vosko (Ed.). *Precarious employment: Understanding labour market insecurity in Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

⁶ Turcotte, M. (2014). [Persons with disabilities and employment](#). Insights on Canadian Society. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 75-006-X2014001.

⁷ The "milder" category includes individuals who reported their disability severity as "mild" or "moderate." The "more severe" category includes individuals who reported their disability as "severe" or "very severe."

opportunity to earn a living through meaningful, paid employment is considered an essential right of all citizens. To this end, the United Nations developed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted in 2006.⁸ The convention provides direction for developing legislation, policies and practices that uphold the rights of persons with disabilities in various facets of life, including employment.⁹

Canada is one of more than 160 signatories to the CRPD. In 2019, the federal government gave Royal Assent to the Accessible Canada Act promoting accessibility and inclusion across all facets of social participation, with work as one of seven priority areas.¹⁰ This Act, which helps fulfill Canada's obligations under the CRPD, is designed to ensure a barrier-free country for persons with disabilities. While Canadian society has begun to acknowledge that full inclusion requires conditions that enable independence, autonomy and equal opportunity for persons with disabilities, much work remains to be done to level the playing field in employment opportunities.

In this report, we review skills gaps and other barriers that must be tackled for persons with disabilities to be more fully included in paid employment. Issues discussed include lower rates of educational attainment, skills gaps, pay discrimination, employer stigma, concerns about the high cost of accommodation, and lack of access to the required supports in education and employment. Research on many of these topics is limited, and we conclude by identifying areas for further research that could inform policy and practice to make the future world of work more equitable and inclusive.

⁸ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Disability. (2019). [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#). United Nations. For the right to work, see Article 27.

⁹ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Disability. (2006). [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#). United Nations.

¹⁰ Parliament of Canada. (2019). [An act to ensure a barrier-free Canada](#).

A PROFILE OF DISABILITY IN CANADA

Defining Disability

A good starting point for discussing the equity of labour-market opportunities for persons with disabilities is to review how disability is understood in contemporary society. Historically, disability was characterized as a medical condition—a structural or functional deficit associated with a person. Many social safety net programs in Canada continue to use this “medical model” of disability.¹¹ Access to benefits and supports in many programs requires a medical assessment to establish the nature and level of impairment, which is seen as synonymous with disability.

More recent understandings of the disablement process draw on a social and socio-medical approach, where a health deficit or impairment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for disability. These definitions regard as critical the social, attitudinal and built environments that “create” disability by imposing barriers to participation for persons with abilities outside the range defined as “normal.” In this framing, disability is a social construction rather than a characteristic of an individual.^{12,13,14}

Mental health-related disabilities are more common among women than men, and mental health-related, addiction and intellectual disabilities are often more stigmatized than physical disabilities.



¹¹ Withers, A. (2016). [\(Re\)constructing and \(re\)habilitating the disabled body: World War One era disability politics and its enduring ramifications](#). Canadian Review of Social Policy/Revue Canadienne de Politique Sociale, 75(1), 30-58.

¹² Office of Disability Issues. (2003). [Defining disability: A complex issue](#). Office of Disability Issues, Human Resources Development Canada.

¹³ Oliver, M. (1983). [Social work with disabled people](#). Basingstoke: Macmillan

¹⁴ Oliver, M. (2013). [The social model of disability: Thirty years on](#). Disability & Society, 28(7), 1024-1026.

The social approach opens the possibility for more inclusive societies through changes to societal norms, including the removal of social and physical barriers to participation in education, employment and other social roles. Recent public policy efforts in Canada have moved in this direction. Legislation such as the Accessible Canada Act, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, the Accessibility for Manitobans Act and Nova Scotia's Accessibility Act all aim to improve the lives of millions of Canadians with disabilities.

The Prevalence of Disability

One in five Canadians aged 15 or older—about 6.2 million people—have one or more disabilities.¹⁵ Rates of disability increase with age: 13 percent of Canadians aged 15 to 24 have at least one disability, compared with 38 percent of those aged 65 and older.¹⁶

Disability is a complex construct used to describe a diverse set of circumstances and experiences.^{17, 18} To begin understanding this complexity, it is critical to disaggregate disability by key characteristics. Canadians experience various disabilities, including those related to pain, flexibility, mental health and development. (Table 2 describes the distribution of disability across some of the most common forms.) It is important to note that just 29 percent of Canadians with disabilities have only one type of disability.¹⁹ Mental health-related disabilities are more common among women than men,²⁰ and mental health-related, addiction and intellectual disabilities are often more stigmatized than physical disabilities.^{21,22,23}

¹⁵ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Stone, D. and Colella, A. (1996). [A model of factors affecting the treatment of disabled individuals in organizations](#). *Academy of Management Review*, 21(2), 352-401.

¹⁸ Dwertmann, D. (2016). [Management research on disabilities: Examining methodological challenges and possible solutions](#). *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 27(14), 1477-1509.

¹⁹ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

²⁰ Ibid.












²¹ Brohan, E. and Thornicroft, G. (2010). [Stigma and discrimination of mental health problems: Workplace implications](#). *Occupational Medicine*, 60(6), 414-415.

²² Harpur, P., Connolly, U. and Blanck, P. (2017). [Socially constructed hierarchies of impairments: The case of Australian and Irish workers' access to compensation for injuries](#). *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*.

²³ Perlin, M. (1993). [On "sanism"](#). *SMU Law Review*, 46(2), 373-407.

Table 2: Prevalence of Disability by Type and Sex (15 Years of Age and Over)

Note: Figures rounded to nearest thousand or million. The sum of the values for each category may differ from the total due to rounding.

DISABILITY TYPE		WOMEN		MEN		BOTH	
Total population—aged 15 years and over		14.3M	100.0	13.7M	100.0	28M	100.0
	Pain-related*	2.4M	16.6%	1.7M	12.4%	4.1M	14.5%
	Flexibility*	1.7M	10.9%	1.2M	9.0%	2.8M	10.0%
	Mobility*	1.6M	11.2%	1.1M	7.9%	2.7M	9.6%
	Mental health-related*	1.3M	8.9%	0.8M	5.5%	2M	7.2%
	Seeing*	0.9M	6.3%	0.6M	4.5%	1.5M	5.4%
	Hearing*	0.6M	4.3%	0.7M	5.2%	1.3M	4.8%
	Dexterity*	0.8M	5.5%	0.5M	3.6%	1.3M	4.6%
	Learning	0.6M	3.9%	0.6M	4.0%	1.1M	3.9%
	Memory*	0.6M	4.0%	0.5M	3.5%	1M	3.8%
	Developmental*	0.1M	0.9%	0.2M	1.4%	0.3M	1.1%
	Unknown	0.08M	0.5%	0.08M	0.6%	0.2M	0.6%

Source: Morris et al. (2018) with data from Statistics Canada. (2017). Canadian Survey on Disability.

Another way to understand disability is by severity of the underlying health condition or impairment.²⁴ Of Canadians with disabilities, 37 percent are categorized as having a mild disability, while 20 percent have a moderate disability, 21 percent a severe disability and 22 percent a very severe disability.²⁵ Life satisfaction is inversely related to disability severity.²⁶ Women are more likely than men to have severe and very severe disabilities.²⁷ (Table 3 provides details on the relationship between disability severity and sex.)

Table 3: Prevalence of Disability by Severity and Sex (15 Years of Age and Over)

Note: Figures rounded to nearest thousand or million. The sum of the values for each category may differ from the total due to rounding.

GLOBAL SEVERITY CLASS	WOMEN		MEN		BOTH	
	Million	Percentage	Million	Percentage	Million	Percentage
Total	3.5M	100.0	2.8M	100.0	6.3M	100.0
Mild*	1.3M	35.8%	1.1M	39.0%	2.3M	37.2%
Moderate	0.7M	19.3%	0.6M	20.6%	1.2M	19.9%
Severe*	0.8M	21.7%	0.5M	19.5%	1.3M	20.7%
Very severe*	0.8M	23.1%	0.6	20.9%	1.4M	22.1%

* Significant difference in percentage between women and men at $p < .05$

Source: Morris et al. (2018) with data from Statistics Canada's Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017.

The experiences of persons living with disabilities early in life are often quite different from those who acquire them later in life, which is the more common circumstance.²⁸ A noteworthy characteristic of persons with early onset disabilities is that they are less likely to access post-secondary education than their non-disabled peers. Persons who acquire a disability later in life are more likely to leave the labour force following the onset of their disability than their non-disabled peers. Education, training and

²⁴ Cloutier, E., Grondin, C. and Lévesque, A. (2018). [Canadian survey on disability, 2017: Concept and methods guide](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018001.

²⁵ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

²⁶ Uppal, S. (2006). [Impact of the timing, type and severity of disability on the subjective well-being of individuals with disabilities](#). *Social Science & Medicine*, 63(2), 525-539.

²⁷ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

²⁸ Ibid.

supports need to address the specific barriers faced by persons whose disabilities were acquired at different life stages, given the impact that time of disability onset has on individuals' experiences.

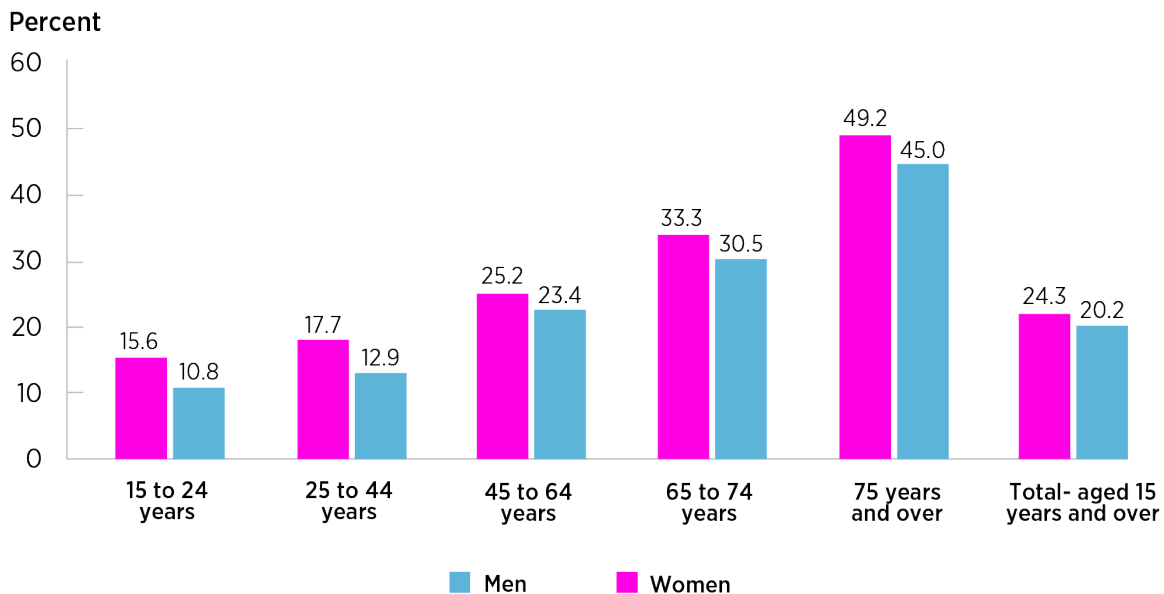
Disability and Intersectionality

Rates of disability vary by sex, suggesting that a gender lens is important in the study of disability.²⁹

Women are more likely than men to have a disability, according to a recent analysis of the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability from Statistics Canada.³⁰ (Figure 1 provides a breakdown of the prevalence of disability in Canada by age group and sex.)

Figure 1: Disability Prevalence by Age Group and Sex (15 Years of Age and Over)

Note: Differences between women and men are significantly different for all age groups ($p < 0.05$).



Source: Morris et al. (2018) with data from Statistics Canada. (2017). Canadian Survey on Disability.

Age and sex are only two characteristics that shape individuals' lived experiences. Other factors, such as racialized minority and/or immigrant status, Indigenous status, sexual orientation and country of origin, also play important roles. The intersectionality of individuals' various characteristics has been deemed critical to understanding how people's lived experiences will differ.

²⁹ Crenshaw, K. (1991). [Mapping the margins: Identity politics, intersectionality, and violence against women](#). Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241-1299.

³⁰ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

Researchers have only begun to unpack the intersection of disability and other aspects of identity and social location. For instance, using data from the United States, Linda Shaw and colleagues found that Hispanic and American Indian women with behavioural impairments who were 35 years of age and older filed more disability harassment complaints than individuals identifying with other racial groups, impairments and age clusters.³¹ Indigenous persons with disabilities have been described as a “hidden population” that is ignored in Canadian policy.³² This is particularly troubling given that, for example, disability and illness is the primary reason that 32 percent of First Nations people living off reserve do not look for employment when they would like to work.³³

Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities

According to Stuart Morris and colleagues, 546,410 youth and young adults aged 15 to 24 are living with disabilities in Canada.³⁴ More than 83,000 of those individuals are outside the traditional school system and labour market despite having the potential to attend school or participate in work.³⁵ Mental health-related disabilities are by far the most common type of disability in this age bracket, affecting 60 percent of Canadian youth and young adults with disabilities.³⁶ Strikingly, women are twice as likely as men to have a mental health-related disability in this age group.³⁷ By age 40, about half the Canadian population will have experienced a mental illness.³⁸ Recognizing the prevalence of mental health-related disability among people outside of, entering or already part of the workforce should be central to any strategy focused on training, school-to-work transitions and employment.

Employment Outcomes of Persons with Disabilities

A recent Statistics Canada report found that persons without a disability were more than twice as likely to be employed than those living with very severe disabilities (80 percent versus 31 percent).³⁹

³¹ Shaw, L., Chan, F. and McMahon, B. (2012). [Intersectionality and disability harassment: The interactive effects of disability, race, age, and gender](#). Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 55(2), 82-91.

³² Durst, D. and Bluehardt, M. (2004). Aboriginal people with disabilities: A vacuum in public policy. Regina: University of Regina, Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy.

³³ Statistics Canada. (2018). [Labour market experiences of First Nations people living off reserve](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-653-X2018003.

³⁴ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2019). [Workplace](#).

³⁹ Ibid.

Employment levels for those with mild, moderate and severe disabilities were all lower than those without disabilities (76 percent, 67 percent and 49 percent respectively).⁴⁰

Researchers have consistently reported that Canadians with disabilities have worse employment and work-related outcomes than their counterparts without disabilities.^{41, 42, 43} They are more likely to be employed in low-skilled jobs, such as personal service and customer information service roles.⁴⁴ They are also less likely to hold higher-skilled positions, such as professional and management jobs.⁴⁵ In addition, disability severity and labour-market earnings are strongly correlated. In 2017, the median employment income of Canadians without disabilities aged 15 to 64 was \$41,671, while it was \$39,343 for those with mild disabilities.⁴⁶ For Canadians with more severe disabilities, however, the figure fell to \$25,309. (Table 4 provides data on median employment income disaggregated by disability status, disability severity, age group and sex.)

By age 40, about half the Canadian population will have experienced a mental illness. Recognizing the prevalence of mental health-related disability among people outside of, entering or already part of the workforce should be central to any strategy focused on training, school-to-work transitions and employment.



⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

⁴² Till, M., et al. (2015). [A profile of the labour market experiences of adults with disabilities among Canadians aged 15 years and older, 2012](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2015005.

⁴³ Turcotte, M. (2014). [Persons with disabilities and employment](#). Insights on Canadian Society. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 75-006-X2014001.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

Table 4: Median Employment Income by Disability Status, Disability Severity, Age Group and Sex (15 Years of Age and Over)

DISABILITY STATUS	AGED 15 TO 64 YEARS*		AGED 65 YEARS AND OVER**	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
	Dollars			
Persons without disabilities	\$33,882	\$47,256	\$24,570	\$37,723
Persons with disabilities				
Milder	\$31,109	\$45,031	\$23,802	\$34,023
More severe	\$22,867	\$28,336	\$19,805	\$29,144

* Median employment income (>0) by severity, age, and gender

** Median total before-tax income (>0) for those aged 65+, by severity and gender

Source: Statistics Canada. (2017). Canadian Survey on Disability.

EDUCATION AND THE DISABILITY SKILLS GAP

The relationship between educational attainment and disability severity is central to understanding the disability skills gap in Canada. Canadians with milder disabilities have educational attainment levels that are fairly similar to those of Canadians without disabilities and, as a result, these two groups have similar employment rates.⁴⁷ Indeed, it is important to recognize that more education results in higher employment rates in Canada, irrespective of disability status.

As shown in Figure 2, Canadians with mild or moderate disabilities who have post-secondary degrees have only a slightly lower employment rate than Canadians without disabilities who have the same educational credentials.⁴⁸ The disparity is much higher for Canadians with disabilities who have attained lower levels of education. Additionally, Canadians with more severe disabilities have lower educational levels and employment rates than Canadians with milder disabilities and those without disabilities. As a result, researchers have highlighted that “education and skills development are integral to closing the employment gap between persons with and without disabilities.”⁴⁹

Bridging the skills gap is likely to become more important in the near future: persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented in low-skill, low-education jobs,⁵⁰ and such jobs are at high risk of being impacted by automation.⁵¹ More specifically, many of the most high risk jobs are routine-based and sales- and services-oriented. The jobs that persons with disabilities are overrepresented in fall into those categories, such as jobs in sales, personal and customer information services, retail trade, and accommodation and food services.⁵²

⁴⁷ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

⁴⁸ Turcotte, M. (2014). [Persons with disabilities and employment](#). Insights on Canadian Society. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 75-006-X2014001.

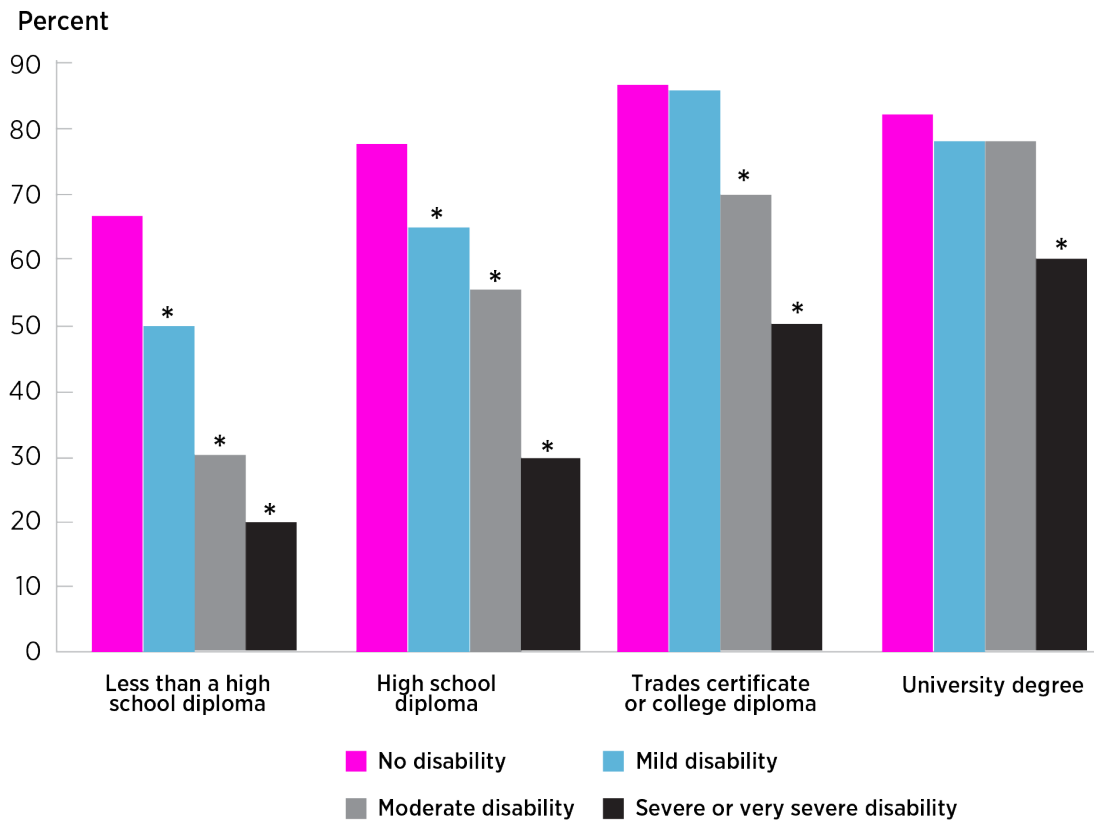
⁴⁹ Till, M., et al. (2015). [A profile of the labour market experiences of adults with disabilities among Canadians aged 15 years and older, 2012](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2015005, 17.

⁵⁰ Turcotte, M. (2014). [Persons with disabilities and employment](#). Insights on Canadian Society. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 75-006-X2014001.

⁵¹ Lamb, C. (2016). The talented Mr. Robot: The impact of automation on Canada’s workforce. The Brookfield Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

⁵² Turcotte, M. (2014). [Persons with disabilities and employment](#). Insights on Canadian Society. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 75-006-X2014001.

Figure 2: Employment Rate by Education Level and Severity, Adjusted for Age



*Significantly different from reference category (no disability) (p < 0.05)

Source: Turcotte, M. (2014) with data from Statistics Canada. (2012). Canadian Survey on Disability,

Achieving better educational outcomes for persons with disabilities will be essential to reducing overrepresentation in low-skill and low-education jobs. For this to occur, the obstacles to educational attainment facing persons with disabilities will need to be addressed. These challenges range from the obvious barriers, such as the difficulties experienced physically accessing educational institutions due to inaccessible infrastructure, to the more subtle ones, such as the practice of segregating students with special education needs in primary or secondary education. In this latter case, the attainment of students with special educational needs often suffers because these segregated classes are taught reduced curricula and students lack access to the full diversity of the school population and activities.⁵³ Students with disabilities may also suffer the negative effects of parents’ and teachers’ reduced expectations.⁵⁴

⁵³ Robson, K. L., et al. (2014). [The intersectionality of postsecondary pathways: The case of high school students with special education needs](#). Canadian Review of Sociology, 51(3) 193-215.

⁵⁴ Parekh, G., and Brown, R. S. (2019). [Changing lanes: The relationship between special education placement and students’ academic futures](#). Educational Policy 2019, Vol. 33(1), 128-130 especially.

Barriers often multiply at the post-secondary level as many supports for students with disabilities that are fully or partially subsidized at the primary and secondary levels—such as interpreters, translators or technical equipment—may no longer be subsidized. This can create significant financial barriers that students with disabilities may lack the resources to overcome.⁵⁵ Students with disabilities often also face greater financial barriers because their costs of living are higher, they may take longer to complete their studies, and they may not be able to rely on earnings from employment—either part-time during the school year or full-time during the summer—to help cover their expenses.⁵⁶ Given this accumulation of barriers over time, the results of a survey conducted for the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation are hardly surprising: while 71 percent of high school graduates without a disability began post-secondary education, only 43 percent of graduates with a disability did so.⁵⁷

Employment Experiences While in School

Employment opportunities while in school are known to increase a student's ability to secure employment when transitioning from school to work.^{58, 59} Canadian students with disabilities have access to fewer of these formative employment opportunities than their peers without disabilities, contributing to a skills gap that reduces the probability of successful labour-market outcomes.⁶⁰ Indeed, Canadians with disabilities cite limited training and inadequate work experience as critical barriers to labour-market access.^{61, 62}

Educational models that build skills through experiential learning and provide access to real workplaces, such as internships and co-op placements, could provide major benefits. A literature review on internship programs for students with learning difficulties noted key features of success include the person having a strong desire to work as well as committed coaches, personalized supports, close contact with parents

⁵⁵ Looker, E. D., and Lowe, G. S. (2001). Post-secondary access and student financial aid in Canada: Current knowledge and research gaps. Canadian Policy Research Networks, 15.

⁵⁶ Kirby, D. (2009). [Widening access: Making the transition from mass to universal post-secondary education in Canada](#). Journal of Applied Research on Learning, 2(3), 10.

⁵⁷ Malatest & Associates. 2007. [The class of 2003: High school follow-up survey](#). Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 29.

⁵⁸ Till, M., et al. (2015). [A profile of the labour market experiences of adults with disabilities among Canadians aged 15 years and older, 2012](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2015005.

⁵⁹ Lapointe, S., Turner, J. (2020). [Leveraging the skills of social sciences and humanities graduates](#). Skills Next. Public Policy Forum, Diversity Institute at Ryerson University, Future Skills Centre.

⁶⁰ Till, M., et al. (2015). [A profile of the labour market experiences of adults with disabilities among Canadians aged 15 years and older, 2012](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2015005.

⁶¹ Till, M., et al. (2015). [A profile of the labour market experiences of adults with disabilities among Canadians aged 15 years and older, 2012](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2015005.

⁶² Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

and good employer relationships.⁶³ Developing and evaluating more such internship programs in the Canadian context should provide evidence on the optimal mix of features in different situations.

Work-integrated learning experiences built into educational curricula are of value to all students in Canada.^{64, 65} However, they may have particular benefit for students with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are often stereotyped as being less competent than their counterparts without disabilities, which can lead to internalization of stigma and result in persons with disabilities having less access to challenging work.^{66, 67} Greater access to work-integrated learning could ensure that students with disabilities receive critical opportunities to develop their skills and build confidence.

Technology also has the potential to benefit students with disabilities in several ways, primarily around facilitating accommodation in classrooms and workplaces. For instance, students with learning disabilities can be accommodated by providing access to text-to-speech, speech-to-text and organizational software.⁶⁸ An array of technologies using auditory, tactile and multimodal feedback can be used to ensure that students with visual impairments receive an equivalent education to their peers without visual impairment.⁶⁹

Training Opportunities for Older Workers with Disabilities

Work-integrated learning is not only relevant for youth and young adults but also of potential value to persons who experience disabilities later in life. Various approaches could be explored to inform the development of such training opportunities for older workers with disabilities. This could include flexible apprenticeship models that allow more time for people to complete training while working.

⁶³ Department for Education. (2013). [Supported internship trial for 16 to 24 year old learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities: An evaluation](#). UK.

⁶⁴ Lamb, C. and Doyle, S. (2017). Future-proof: Preparing young Canadians for the future of work. Brookfield Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

⁶⁵ Lapointe, S., Turner, J. (2020). [Leveraging the skills of social sciences and humanities graduates](#). Skills Next. Public Policy Forum, Diversity Institute at Ryerson University, Future Skills Centre.

⁶⁶ Jones, G. (1997). [Advancement opportunity issues for persons with disabilities](#). Human Resource Management Review, 7(1), 55-76.

⁶⁷ Stone, D. and Colella, A. (1996). [A model of factors affecting the treatment of disabled individuals in organizations](#). Academy of Management Review, 21(2), 352-401.

⁶⁸ Forgrave, K. (2002). [Assistive technology: Empowering students with learning disabilities](#). The Clearing House, 75(3), 122-126.

⁶⁹ Ahmed, I. and Chao, T. (2018). [Assistive learning technologies for students with visual impairments: A critical rehumanizing review](#). Investigations in Mathematics Learning, 10(3), 173-185.

BARRIERS IN THE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

Disability-related employment equity issues are a concern around the world, and Canada is no exception.⁷⁰ Many employers are hesitant to hire, retain and promote persons with disabilities due to discriminatory beliefs and stereotypes about disability.⁷¹ Martin Turcotte, for example, found that 12 percent of Canadians with disabilities reported being refused work because of their disability.⁷² Notably, this figure is much higher among unemployed Canadians with disabilities, Canadian youth with disabilities and Canadians with severe disabilities. In some cases, biased hiring decisions may be due to employers fearing legal ramifications should they decide to dismiss that candidate in the future due to poor job fit or performance issues unrelated to their disability.⁷³

Employers may also inadvertently impose technological barriers on job seekers with disabilities during the application process. For example, many persons with cognitive disabilities are excluded from applying for jobs as organizations move toward online-only job applications. Persons with cognitive disabilities may require additional time during the application process, which can result in an application tool timing out.⁷⁴ In addition, job application websites are often inaccessible for persons with visual impairment who use screen readers.⁷⁵

Even when they are able to find work, persons with disabilities face pay discrimination. Morley Gunderson and Byron Lee estimated this discrimination in Canada using data from the 2006 Participation and Activity Limitations Survey.⁷⁶ They reported a 10 percent pay gap attributable to discrimination between Canadians with and without disabilities, after controlling for pay-related characteristics and several other factors.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ World Health Organization. (2011). [World report on disabilities](#).

⁷¹ Bonaccio, S., et al. (2019). [The participation of people with disabilities in the workplace across the employment cycle: Employer concerns and research evidence](#). Journal of Business and Psychology.

⁷² Turcotte, M. (2014). [Persons with disabilities and employment](#). Insights on Canadian Society. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 75-006-X2014001.

⁷³ See, for example, Bonaccio, S., et al. (2019). [The participation of people with disabilities in the workplace across the employment cycle: Employer concerns and research evidence](#). Journal of Business and Psychology.

⁷⁴ Spurgaitis, K. (2019). [Why Ontarians with developmental disabilities still face employment barriers](#). TVO.

⁷⁵ Lazar, J., Olalere, A. and Wentz, B. (2012). [Investigating the accessibility and usability of job application web sites for blind users](#). Journal of Usability Studies, 7(2), 68-87.

⁷⁶ Gunderson, M. and Lee, B. (2016). [Pay discrimination against persons with disabilities: Canadian evidence from PALS](#). The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 27(14), 1531-1549.

⁷⁷ This gap does not consider people with disabilities who were under- or unemployed or out of the labour force.

Discrimination and Failure to Accommodate

Access to workplace accommodation is a serious concern for many Canadians with disabilities, despite legislation that requires employers to provide reasonable accommodation. For a variety of reasons, many Canadians with disabilities are uncomfortable or fearful of asking for accommodations in the workplace.^{78, 79, 80, 81} The most common accommodations needed include modified hours or reduced work hours, modified or different duties, a modified or ergonomic workstation and the option to work from home.⁸² Many of these accommodations cost relatively little to implement, yet many employers mistakenly assume that most accommodations for persons with disabilities are expensive.⁸³ (Figure 3 describes the most common accommodations required by employees with disabilities).

⁷⁸ Morris, S. (2019). [Workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities in Canada, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2019001.

⁷⁹ Till, M., et al. (2015). [A profile of the labour market experiences of adults with disabilities among Canadians aged 15 years and older, 2012](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2015005.

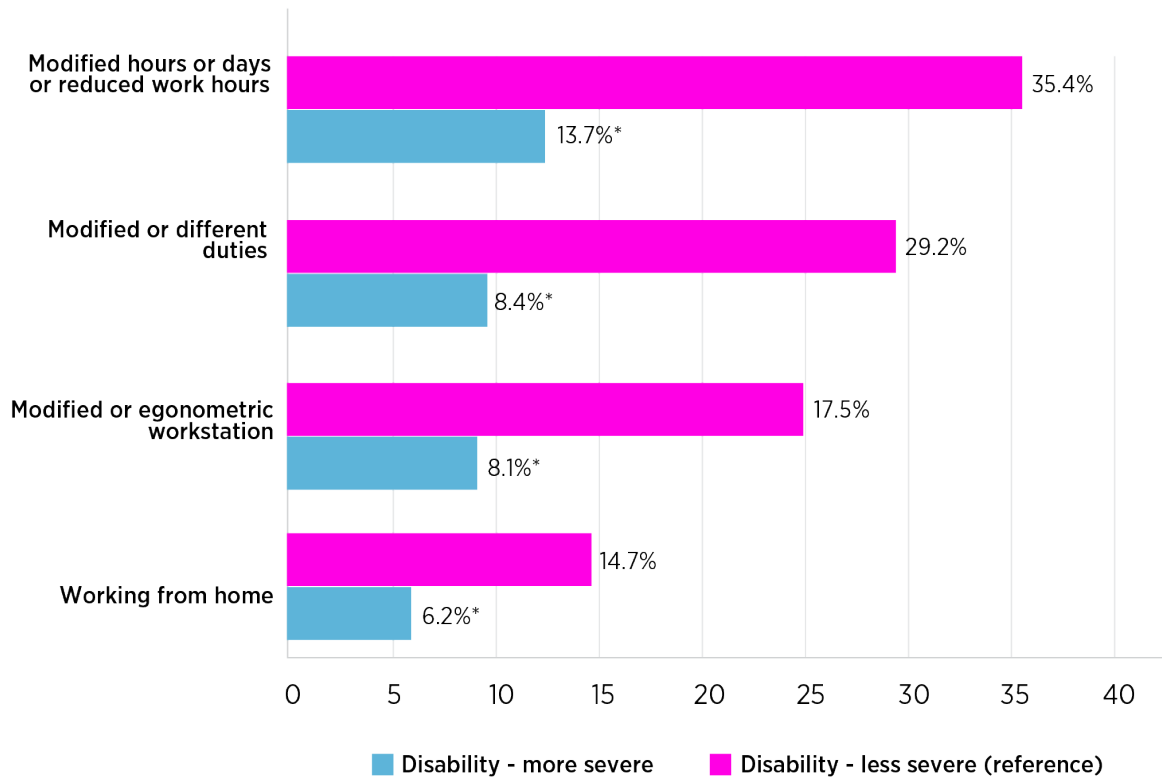
⁸⁰ Jetha, A., et al (2019). [Supporting the transition into employment: A study of Canadian young adults living with disabilities](#). Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation.

⁸¹ Morris, S., et al. (2018). [A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2018002.

⁸² Morris, S. (2019). [Workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities in Canada, 2017](#). Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-654-X2019001.

⁸³ Bonaccio, S., et al. (2019). [The participation of people with disabilities in the workplace across the employment cycle: Employer concerns and research evidence](#). Journal of Business and Psychology.

Figure 3: Most Commonly Required Accommodations for Employees with Disabilities (from 25 to 64 Years of Age) by Disability Severity



*Significantly different from reference category (p < 0.05)

Source: Morris (2019) with data from Statistics Canada’s Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017.

Disability Confidence

Additional education and support for employers on disability-related matters is needed to mitigate a variety of needless barriers to employment. One way that services providers and others have sought to do so has been to help employers develop “disability confidence.” Disability confident employers have the knowledge and ability to create inclusive and accessible work environments for their employees as well as their customers.^{84, 85}

⁸⁴ Lindsay, S., et al. (2019). [A framework for developing employer’s disability confidence](#). Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, 38(1), 40-55.

⁸⁵ Suter, R., Scott-Parker, S. and Zadek, S. (2007). [Realising potential: Disability confidence builds better business](#). Cornell University.

Developing disability confidence typically occurs in four stages.⁸⁶ Discomfort about disability characterizes the first stage, when stigmatization and a lack of understanding mar perceptions and practices. With some effort, however, employers can enter the second stage by moving beyond their comfort zone and engaging in training that raises awareness around key issues. They can then broaden their perspectives in a third stage, emphasizing individual ability rather than stereotypes. Going one step further, disability confident employers focus on inclusion and accessibility by developing supportive work cultures and advocating for social change within and beyond their organization.⁸⁷

Employers play a major role in creating job opportunities for persons with disabilities and so developing disability confident employers is likely to be an integral part of any successful strategy for labour-market inclusion. Looking forward, disability confidence training for employers is likely to become increasingly important as changes in the world of work risk disproportionately harming persons with disabilities.

Self-Employment

Given the employer-side barriers that many persons with disabilities encounter, self-employment has been noted as an alternative for those who have trouble accessing the traditional labour market. More work is needed on how best to provide supports and training for entrepreneurial initiatives. John Kitching has provided a good exploration of this possibility, concluding that entrepreneurship can be a good option for persons with disabilities under the right conditions.⁸⁸ Overall, however, further research and pilot evaluations are needed to produce evidence that can inform guidance on best practices in this area.

⁸⁶ Lindsay, S. and Cancelliere, S. (2018). [A model for developing disability confidence](#). *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 40(18), 2122-2131.

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Kitching J. (2014). [Entrepreneurship and self-employment by people with disabilities](#). Background Paper for the OECD Project on Inclusive Entrepreneurship. OECD.

PUBLIC SECTOR AND SERVICES PROVIDER ROLES

Public Sector

The public sector plays an essential role in the work disability policy arena. It not only provides a safety net for persons with disabilities when they are unable to work, but also funds employment support services and various financial incentives to expand employment opportunities. Employment services and financial incentives are policy levers broadly described as active labour-market policies. They include training schemes and employment services and subsidies designed to help working-age youth and adults enter and maintain paid employment. Many public disability income support programs now put more emphasis on active labour-market policies than in the past, when they focused primarily on providing income benefits. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development noted the need for such a shift in a 2010 report on the Canadian work disability policy system.⁸⁹

Services Providers

Specific employment programs have been developed to support persons with intellectual disabilities, serious mental health conditions and traumatic brain injuries. These models provide workers with the ongoing support of a job coach to obtain and sustain employment. A large amount of literature is available that evaluates this approach.^{90, 91} More recently, the model has been adopted for persons with physical disabilities, but there is less research on the merits of its use for persons with other types of disabilities. Services providers in the field have been developing what some describe as “sustainability supports,” which warrant evaluation and development into documented best practices.

Services providers often play a central role in making financial incentives available to employers. In the work disability policy arena, financial incentives include wage subsidies, financial and other support for accommodations, penalties/rewards tied to quotas, coverage of healthcare or pharmaceutical benefits, and tax credits or benefits. These financial incentives are used to motivate employers to recruit, retain and promote persons with disabilities. Substantial resources are deployed to support such incentives, but the evidence on their merits is modest at best. Research is needed to understand the optimal mix of

⁸⁹ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2010). [Sickness, disability and work: Breaking the barriers: Canada: Opportunities for collaboration](#).

⁹⁰ Bond, G. R. (2004). [Supported employment: Evidence for an evidence-based practice](#). *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 27(4), 345-359.

⁹¹ Modini M., et al. (2016). [Supported employment for people with severe mental illness: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the international evidence](#). *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 209(1), 14-22.

different types of financial incentives that can help expand workforce opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Support Systems

In a recent review of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, former Ontario Lieutenant Governor David Onley reported that transportation barriers remain a major obstacle to work for many Ontarians with disabilities.⁹² He noted that “[t]he reason is perhaps obvious: if you can’t leave your home, there will be no job...”⁹³ Thus, efforts to support the ability of Canadians with disabilities to work must not only consider strategies that are worker-focused (e.g., skills-building, education, peer-to-peer support, internships and co-ops) and employer-focused (e.g., disability confidence training and financial support), but also factors around the work itself (e.g., transportation, government policy and supports, and healthcare systems). The disability confidence concept could be extended beyond employers and workplaces to reach and inform policymakers, healthcare workers, university educators and programs, as well as the architects and engineers who design and implement systems that impact the accessibility of work for Canadians with disabilities.

The Centre for Universal Design has developed seven principles of universal and inclusive design that should guide any policy, building, service or other factor influencing the accessibility of work for persons with disabilities.⁹⁴ The principles, quoted below, were also further developed in a series of guidelines that add specific detail to support their use.

1. **Equitable Use:** The design is useful and marketable to persons with diverse abilities.
2. **Flexibility in Use:** The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
3. **Simple and Intuitive Use:** Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills or current concentration level.
4. **Perceptible Information:** The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user’s sensory abilities.
5. **Tolerance for Error:** The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.
6. **Low Physical Effort:** The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.
7. **Size and Space for Approach and Use:** Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation and use regardless of user’s body size, posture or mobility.⁹⁵

⁹² Onley, D. (2019). [Listening to Ontarians with disabilities: Report of the third review of the accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities Act, 2005](#). Government of Ontario.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. (2019). [The 7 principles](#).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

NEXT STEPS

Data and research in the area of disability and skills gaps, underemployment and equity of labour-market opportunities are relatively scarce. Some noteworthy studies do exist in the peer-reviewed and grey literature, along with some syntheses of field knowledge and experience, but more work is needed. Four key areas merit attention in future research:

1. Persons with disabilities are not a homogenous group. The type and number of disabilities, their severity and course, age of disability onset, gender, racial minority status, educational attainment and work experiences all play a role in how individuals experience disability. More transdisciplinary research is needed to better understand the complexities of identity and social location. Specifically, research is needed on how social location at different points in the life course affect the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, in particular, experiences in the labour market. Research is needed on how the future world of work will bear on the work experiences of persons with disabilities differently, depending on their socio-demographic characteristics and what supports will be needed to optimize engagement.
2. Persons with disabilities are underrepresented in many of the occupations where the number of jobs is projected to expand (e.g., managerial and professional) and overrepresented in occupations expected to decline (e.g., clerical and manual), especially due to automation. Persons with disabilities are typically trapped in entry-level positions with minimal opportunity for promotion. The challenges are complex and warrant exploration. Factors may include stigma, employers' lack of disability confidence, lack of access to needed supports, absence of training and mentorship opportunities, and more limited educational attainment. Further research is needed to understand how automation will impact the jobs and sectors where persons with disabilities are often employed and to develop strategies that mitigate any harm and open up new employment possibilities. Additional research is needed to better understand how opportunities in growth sectors can be made accessible and inclusive of talent, regardless of disability status. In particular, programs are needed at the post-secondary level that are accessible and inclusive of all students, including persons with various disabilities. On the organizational side, capacity for uptake of talent needs to be promoted through advancement of disability management systems and provision of tools and resources to support the recruitment, retention and promotion of persons with disabilities.
3. Educational institutions, service providers and employers can all serve as key enablers in the success of persons with disabilities. It is vital that they have the knowledge and skills to assist persons with disabilities in acquiring educational credentials, expertise and training that support meaningful and sustainable employment. More research is needed on how employers might

support the transition from school to work, which is a particularly challenging time. This could include exploring different ways in which employers can be actively engaged in the curriculum and activities of post-secondary institutions. For example, they might assist institutions in better preparing students with disabilities for apprenticeships, internships and practicums, and ensuring that all these training opportunities are well aligned with the skills likely to be in high demand in future. Research is needed on alternative approaches for integrated learning that blend post-secondary curricula with field training opportunities, as well as how best to capitalize on employer and other industry expertise in curriculum development.

4. Two key barriers that arise in workplaces are negative attitudes and lack of awareness about accommodation best practices. Guiding employers, policymakers, healthcare workers, university educators, architects and engineers in building disability confidence and changing workplace cultures will be key. Small and mid-sized employers, the primary creators of jobs, are in particular need of guidance and support to break down employment barriers. Persons with learning disabilities and mental health conditions experience more obstacles in the labour market than those with physical disabilities. They also represent the largest proportion of youth with disabilities. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has developed some innovative best practice guidance for employers.⁹⁶ However, more research is needed on accommodation practices that will help both educators and employers do their part to ensure that persons with disabilities thrive in the future world of work. Though best practices in disability management are inclusive of physical, cognitive and mental health disabilities, additional focused guidance needs to be developed to support uptake of persons with mental health conditions. Some valuable tools and resources have been developed by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, but more is needed to support employer disability confidence-building in the area of accommodation for persons with mental health conditions, particularly for small and mid-sized employers.

⁹⁶ Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, University of Toronto, and Queen's University. (2013). [The aspiring workforce: Employment and income for people with serious mental illness](#). Mental Health Commission of Canada.

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