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Neglected or Hidden: Connecting Employers and People with Disabilities in Canada

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Neglected or Hidden: Connecting Employers and People with Disabilities in Canada

Abstract
[Excerpt] In spite of a myriad of initiatives introduced by governments at all levels over the past twenty-five years, people with disabilities fare more poorly in Canada's workforce than do their non-disabled counterparts. Labour force participation rates are at 49% for people with disabilities, compared to 65% for the general population. Unemployment rates for people with disabilities are also close to 70% above the national average. Particularly troubling to Canadians with disabilities and the organizations who serve them is the fact that many employers say they regularly face significant challenges finding appropriately trained workers to fill vacant positions.

Keywords
government, Canada, workforce, initiatives, plan, unemployment, employer, trained worker, people, disability, Gladnet, labour force, disabilities, Canadian Abilities Foundation (CAF)

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Summary Report

Neglected or Hidden:

Connecting Employers and People with Disabilities in Canada

Prepared by:
Canadian Abilities Foundation
340 College Street, Suite 650
Toronto, Ontario M5T 3A9
Tel: 416-923-1885
Fax: 416-923-9829
E-mail: able@abilities.ca
Internet: www.abilities.ca

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Study Background and Methodology

In spite of a myriad of initiatives introduced by governments at all levels over the past twenty-five years, people with disabilities fare more poorly in Canada's workforce than do their non-disabled counterparts. Labour force participation rates are at 49% for people with disabilities, compared to 65% for the general population. Unemployment rates for people with disabilities are also close to 70% above the national average. Particularly troubling to Canadians with disabilities and the organizations who serve them is the fact that many employers say they regularly face significant challenges finding appropriately trained workers to fill vacant positions.

The Canadian Abilities Foundation (CAF) undertook the nation-wide Neglected or Hidden research project to determine why employment continues to be an elusive dream for tens of thousands of Canadians with disabilities. The Foundation felt that a better understanding of the overall employment-related challenges facing people with disabilities, and how to overcome them, would positively influence their employment levels. Employers would be able to tap into a new wealth of human capital, while increased employment would reduce the strain on the limited financial resources available to the community organizations that provide employment-related services to people with disabilities. As a side benefit, governments would experience a reduced dependence on various "safety net" programs used by unemployed people with disabilities. Should savings in this are be passed along to taxpayers, they too would benefit from this increased employment.

The Foundation identified four key questions that if felt needed answers before employment levels amongst job seekers with disabilities would move in a positive direction:

1. How can employers more readily find the tens of thousands of people with disabilities who are presently seeking employment?
2. Why are people with disabilities not responding to employment solicitations, or even to offers of skills upgrading that would lead to virtually guaranteed employment?
3. Why are employers unable to attract qualified workers with disabilities?
4. Are solicitations targeting workers with disabilities reaching their mark, and if not, what needs to change?

This report summarizes the highlights of the data that was collected and analysed through Neglected or Hidden over the past year. The number of tables and graphs has been intentionally limited, and the format kept straightforward, in order to make its contents as accessible as possible to readers with disabilities. For those who require more in-depth information, a detailed report of the findings is available online at the Foundation's web site: www.enablelink.org . Over the coming months, additional data from the study along with best practices and "how-to" strategies will also be added to the site.

The Foundation undertook this research project through the financial support of Human Resources Development Canada, and in partnership with *Innovera Integrated Solutions* and *David Redmond and Associates.* This partnership allowed the study to capitalize on the partners' collective wealth of disability-specific expertise, years of research experience, and access to a significant network of business and community organizations that could benefit from the study's findings. It involved three distinct stakeholder groups:

Labour Force Participants with Disabilities (LFPD): The target respondents for this component of the study were labour force participants - people currently in the labour force whether they were employed or not employed and looking for work. Some 1,245 people with disabilities from all regions of the country responded to a comprehensive questionnaire containing both multiple choice and open-ended questions. Twenty -two percent of respondents said they have a mild disability, 37% a moderate disability, and 41% indicated that they have a severe disability. Participants represent all major disability types, and include individuals who are both affiliated and not affiliated with disability-related community and service organizations. It is noteworthy that almost two-thirds of respondents had at least some post-secondary education or certification in a recognized trade.

Disability Service Organizations: Both telephone interviews and in-person consultations were conducted with close to 50 disability-related organizations that are primarily involved with helping people with disabilities find work.

Employers: Some 75 employers of varying sizes and from all regions of the country were asked to share their perspectives on employment and disability issues. Approximately two-thirds agreed to participate in the either telephone or in-person consultations.

The principal means of collecting information from people with disabilities was through an online questionnaire posted on the Neglected or Hidden web site. The Foundation, along with many other community organizations and even some employers, provided web notices about the research as well as links to the site. The questionnaire was made available in various formats and could be completed in either official language. Questionnaires were also distributed by direct mail, and with the assistance of disability organizations, in order to reach those who did not have internet access or who preferred not to use the online version. A toll-free number was advertised for those respondents who wished to participate via a telephone interview. Some community organizations also assisted their clients with questionnaire completion and submission to the researchers.

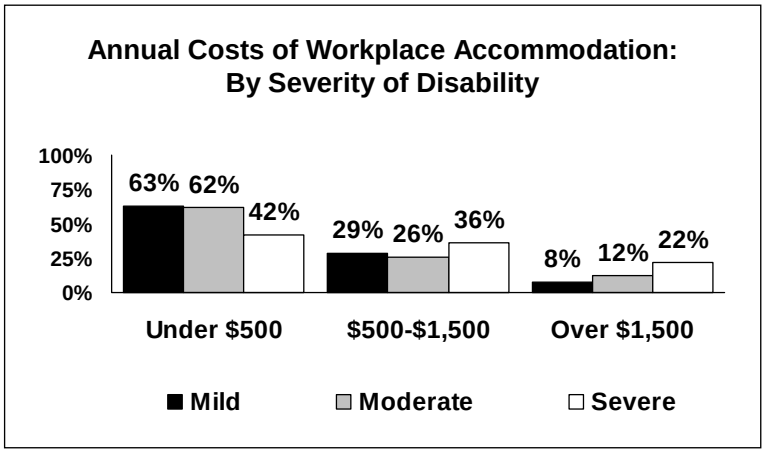
Key Findings

Impacts of Disability on Employment

More than two-thirds of respondents who became disabled during adulthood made a career change following the onset of their disability. Over one-third (34%) of respondents became disabled during their adult working years. Of those who became disabled when they were in the work force, 69% were forced to make a career change as a result of the onset of their disability. Half (50%) of the respondents became disabled during infancy or were disabled at birth and the other 16% became disabled during their youth. The severity of their disability limits work options for close to 60% of the study's respondents, including 73% of those with severe disabilities.

Workplace accommodations are a key to successful employment. Employment will remain out of reach for many job seekers with disabilities unless workplace accommodations and /or flexible working conditions are available at the workplace. For 70% of respondents, the nature of their disability requires that some workplace adjustments or accommodations be made in order for them to perform their work. This includes 89% of those with a severe disability, 68% of those with a moderate disability, and 48% of those with a mild disability. For four out of five respondents, full-time work is possible with suitable workplace accommodations. Even for respondents with a severe disability, just 27% reported that their disability prevents them from working full-time when workplace accommodations are made.

Notwithstanding this broad-based need for at least some level of workplace accommodation, the costs are seen as relatively reasonable. Estimated annual workplace accommodation costs are under $1,500 for almost all workers who have a disability, with 52% estimating that the cost of the needed accommodations would be less than $500 per year. Only about one in six respondents think that their annual workplace accommodation costs would exceed $1,500.



Employers accommodate their workers every day by providing them with office supplies, computer enhancements, parking spaces, kitchen facilities, flexible work hours, etc. Yet most employers interviewed had little experience with workplace accommodation (including job modification techniques), perceived it as a costly measure, and acknowledged it to occasionally influence hiring decisions. However, they did agree that training in this area would be beneficial to both existing workers and new recruits.

Most people with a disability want to work full-time. A majority of the respondents (62%) prefer to work full-time. About one-quarter (23%) indicated a preference for part-time work, and 15% were not sure. Those with a severe disability were only slightly less likely to prefer full-time work (58%).

Qualifications and Preparation for Employment

Respondents without a university degree place a priority on more formal education. Overall, 39% of respondents agreed that they need more formal education to improve their qualifications and job prospects. However, 54% of those with only a high school education and 47% of those with a trades certification or a college education, felt that further post-secondary education is a high priority for improving employment prospects.

Most respondents have taken work-related training. In the last five years, 60% of respondents have taken part in training or an employment related program of at least two consecutive weeks in duration.

Rates of participation in training are highest for those who are under-employed. Training participation rates are 68% for those working part-time and 64% for the unemployed who currently are looking for work. Respondents with more job turnover are more likely to have taken work-related training. Almost three-quarters of respondents (71%) who have had four or more jobs in the last five years have participated in training.

Respondents strongly agreed that they need practical, work-related training. Overall, 59% of respondents agreed that they need more practical training such as specialized courses or on-the-job training. However, more than two thirds of respondents who are unemployed and looking for work, who are aged 16 to 24, or who have only a high school education felt they needed more practical, work-related training.

Employed respondents rated their qualifications as a good match for their current job. Considering both education and work experience, 61% of respondents rated the mach between their qualifications and current job as a good one. However, 30% of working respondents rated themselves as over-qualified for their current job. Just 9% rated themselves as under-qualified for the work they do. Two-thirds of respondents also think their qualifications are well matched for their preferred work.

Job seekers need to match skills to employer needs: Organizations that provide employment services for people with disabilities agree that job seekers with disabilities need to maximize their level of education, and the skills employers seek, if they wish to improve their employment prospects. While they believe overall education levels are improving, these organizations say they are still challenged by a significant number of people with disabilities whose skills simply are not in demand. Unfortunately they have found that many of these individuals are also reluctant to build new skills, and are simply waiting for willing employers to step forward.

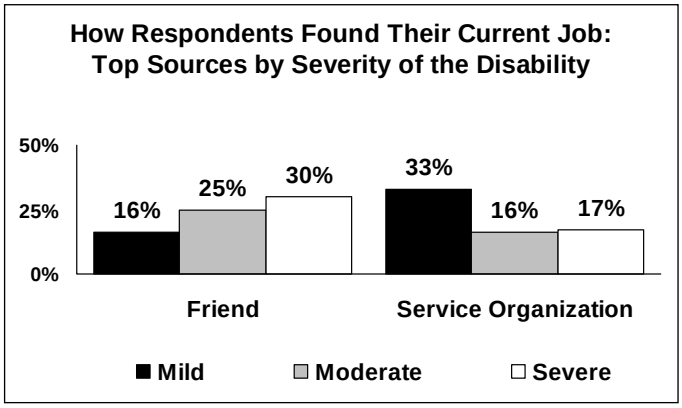
Most employers strongly emphasized their need to find the most qualified person for the job – regardless whether or not the applicant has a disability. They spoke of looking for the right skill set, yet concerns over productivity surfaced regularly when discussing qualifications. Indeed, qualifications often appeared to be measured in terms of productivity rather than capability. In the view of many employers, people with disabilities need to be as productive as their non-disabled co-workers. If they are not, businesses operating in a particular sector may become less competitive than those which chose not to hire people with disabilities.

The Job Search

Many conventional job search tools and techniques such as job fairs, newspaper ads, and "cold calls" are not working and leave job seekers with disabilities frustrated and discouraged. Some have lost the initiative and motivation to look for work and these clearly need to be rekindled. Nevertheless, some approaches do work better than others.

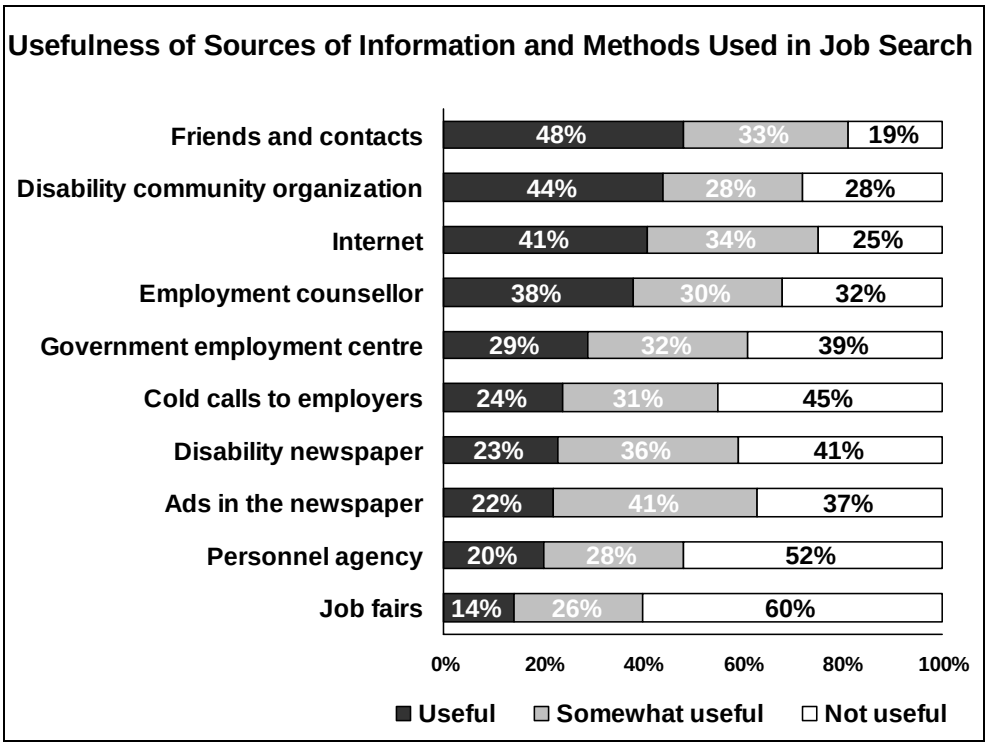
Employees found their jobs through personal contacts and with the assistance of service organizations. Respondents who were employed full-time or part-time at the time of the survey were most likely to find their job through a friend (24%) or with the help of an organization providing employment services to job seekers with disabilities (20%). Other important sources include newspaper ads (11%), competitions or job postings at their place of employment (9%), job postings at a government employment centre (8%), and the internet (7%).

Workers with a severe disability were more likely to have found their job through friends and personal contacts. Employed respondents with a severe disability were more likely than people with either a moderate or mild disability to have had a friend tell them about the job and less likely to find their job with the help of an employment services organization.



Personal contacts and newspaper ads top the list of sources used by job seekers. The top sources of information used by disabled job seekers are friends and personal contacts (73%) and newspaper advertisements (72%). Other important sources of employment information used by a majority of the respondents looking for work are the internet (66%), government-run employment centres (59%), and employment counsellors (53%). Forty-five percent use community organizations providing services to people with disabilities as a source of employment information.

The most useful sources of employment information are direct contacts with individuals and the internet. None of the different sources of information and methods for job searching were rated as useful or very useful by a majority of job seekers. The ones rated as most useful are friends and personal contacts (48%), disability community organizations (44%), the internet (41%), and employment counsellors (38%). All other sources and methods were rated as useful or very useful by fewer than one in three respondents looking for work.



Employer attitudes are seen to contribute to unemployment. People with disabilities believe that employer attitudes have a significant influence on their employment outcomes. Some 45% of all respondents, including 71% of those unemployed, believe employers are reluctant to hire people with disabilities. Fifty-one percent felt employers were unwilling to accommodate the needs of workers with disabilities and 48% attributed a lack of flexible working conditions to their unemployment. While many employers expressed a willingness to hire people with disabilities, they also acknowledged that people with disabilities likely have encountered their share of unreceptive employers, and consequently have developed a negative impression of employers in general.

The perceptions that most unemployed job seekers have of employers are not surprising since the majority of employers interviewed for the study had little experience with recruiting workers with disabilities or integrating them into their organizations. Even though the majority of respondents with disabilities had some level of post secondary education, several employers admitted to looking upon

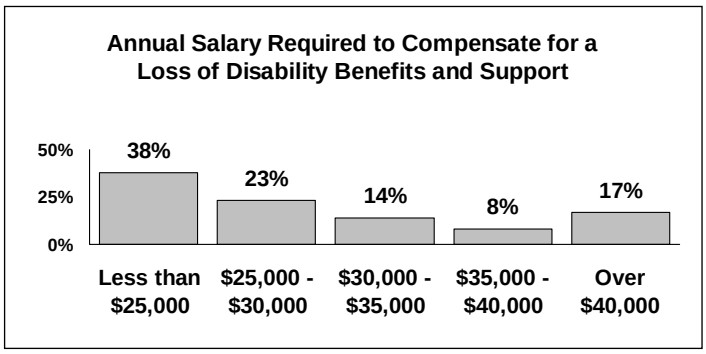
people with disabilities as having very limited skills and abilities and, as such, had never considered them when addressing skills shortages. Many employers also said they did not know where to find qualified workers with disabilities, but some seemed genuinely interested and would welcome the assistance. Few have taken the initiative to reach out to service providers and disabled job seekers. Organizations serving job seekers with disabilities tended to agree that most employers needed to increase their awareness of disability issues and worker abilities, and to be more open to workplace accommodation practices.

Successful Job Search Strategies

Job seekers need practical work experience more than skills development. Almost three-quarters of respondents think they have the skills required by employers. However, 45% reported that they lack enough practical work experience for successful employment. The need for more practical work experience is most acute among those who currently are under-employed: 58% of those who are unemployed and looking for work and 51% of those working part-time feel they need more practical work experience.

The attitudes of job seekers have an impact on the likelihood of their success at finding work. Only 66% of the study's respondents agreed that they have always tried hard to find work. Almost half of all respondents also agreed that they have become discouraged about looking for work and this has had an impact on their job search. Among those who are unemployed and looking for work, the proportion of discouraged job seekers increases to 63%. Organizations serving people with disabilities commented that their clients may become overly dependant on service providers. They encouraged people with disabilities to focus on their abilities – not their disabilities; build a positive attitude; and make looking for work a full time job. Their experience indicates that those who were successfully employed, regardless of the nature or severity of their disability, had clearly taken charge of their personal situation.

Disability benefits and supports are a major disincentive to labour force participation. While just 20% of all respondents agreed they are reluctant to work because they could lose their disability benefits and supports, the potential loss of these benefits is a significant concern for respondents who are under-employed (e.g. 25% of part-time workers) and those who have been unemployed in recent years (48%). A surprising 61% of respondents indicated that an annual salary of $30,000 or less would be sufficient to entice them into the workforce and make up for their loss of disability benefits and supports.



Both employment services providers and those employers who were familiar with government disability benefit programs felt these programs were keeping people out of the workforce. In particular, they felt greater program flexibility would create incentives for people with disabilities to experiment with employment as long as they are not penalized if their attempts are unsuccessful.

The internet will play a large role in future job searches. While the internet did not figure large in past job searches, 77% percent of respondents indicated that they would be likely or somewhat likely to use major internet sites for job seekers in their future job search efforts. Almost half of all respondents also indicated that they would be likely to visit employer-specific websites (48%) and web sites for disabled job seekers (42%).

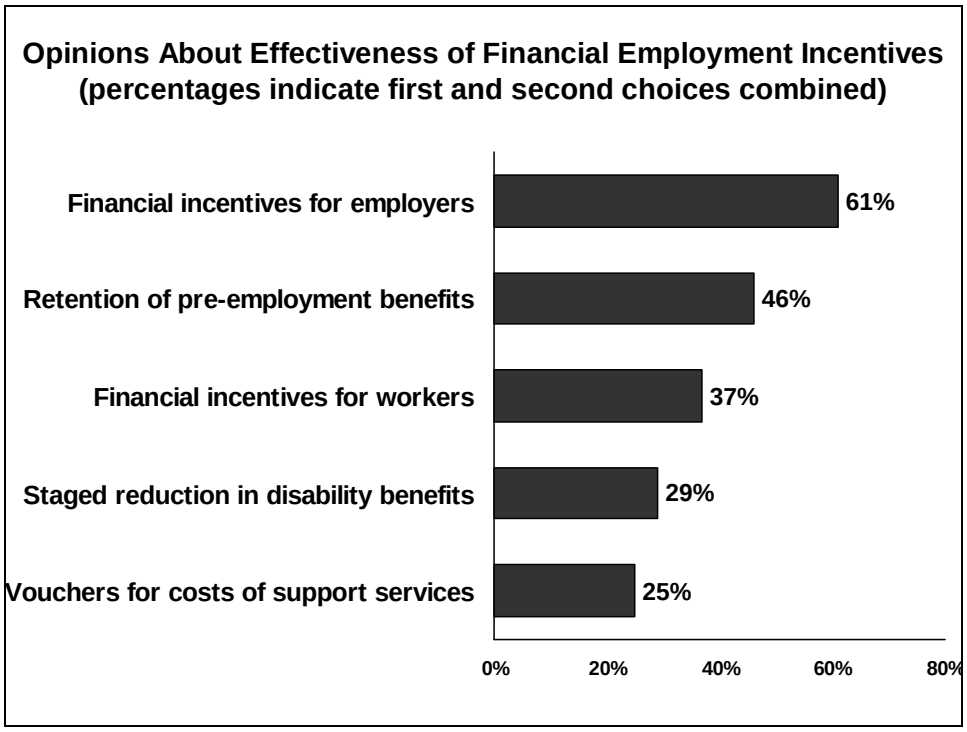
Employers also see the internet as a powerful job search tool, and many already include an employment opportunities web page on their site. Employers also suggested that job seekers should use tools like the internet to thoroughly research employers before approaching them for employment.

Working directly with employment counsellors is a preferred employment strategy. Over half of all respondents indicated that they would like to work with counsellors who specialize in employment for people with disabilities. This percentage increases to 63% of those who are unemployed and looking for work.

Ways to Increase Employment

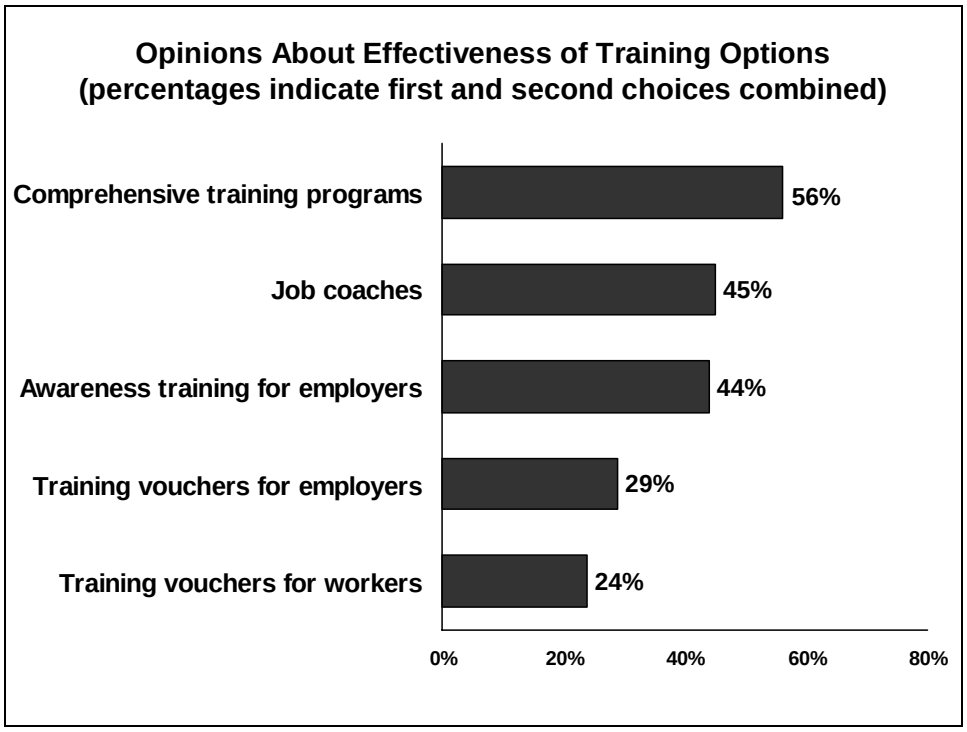
Financial incentives: Study participants were asked their opinions about the potential effectiveness of different financial incentives aimed at reducing unemployment for people with disabilities. Given five choices, 61% of respondents with disabilities rated financial incentives to employers who hire people with disabilities as either the most or second most effective incentive to increase employment. It is noteworthy that while the remaining four choices would provide direct personal benefit to the individual, the majority of respondents with disabilities were willing to forego personal gain just for the chance to work. Please refer to the graph below for the full list of choices and responses.

The majority of organizations providing employment services, however, felt that success in this area depends not on financial incentives, but on motivation. Their experience suggests that financial hiring incentives only offer a short-term benefit and once depleted, jobs typically disappear. To these organizations, an appropriate system of supports for both the disabled worker and employer is a key to successful employment outcomes. Employers offered a broad spectrum of opinions on the subject of incentive programs. Some felt financial hiring incentives, particularly in a highly competitive industry sector, were important considerations while others felt these did not warrant the time and expense of administration. Still others suggested that the cost of assistive devices or any workplace accommodation that would not be a factor when hiring someone without a disability should be covered by government.



Training options: Study participants were also asked for their views on various training options as a means of increasing the employment level for people with disabilities. Given five choices, 56% of respondents with disabilities rated comprehensive training programs that are developed in cooperation with employers, and that assure employment for program graduates, as either the most or second most effective training option that would lead to increased employment. A telling message for employers is revealed in the respondents' number two choice. Forty-four percent indicated that awareness training for employers that focuses on reducing discrimination and changing hiring practices would either be the most or second most effective training incentive. Please refer to the graph below for the full list of choices and responses.

Employment services providers tended to agree that comprehensive skills training partnerships with employers are very effective at generating employment opportunities for people with disabilities. They also saw a need for employers to strengthen their awareness and understanding of the abilities and capabilities of workers with disabilities. Apprenticeship programs, on-the-job training, and skills training partnerships all struck a chord with employers, as long as they focused specifically on employer needs.



Closing the gap between unemployment and work

The desire to work: Most respondents with disabilities expressed a genuine eagerness to be employed, and those with jobs are making an effort to improve their employment situation. Most want to work full-time. However, all stakeholders noted that improvements need to be made to the earliest stages of preparation for employment, including the intake and screening process. Career counselling, for example, was seen to require more attention to employer needs and a better focus on where skills shortages exist. Both employment services providers and employers felt that many people with disabilities were also placing too much emphasis on what they like to do, and not enough on career choices that would make them more competitive in the workforce.

Service delivery effectiveness: Many respondents with disabilities and most employers felt that employment services providers needed to improve the effectiveness of their services. Interestingly, the service providers themselves were often their own harshest critics. They admitted to lacking job development skills and personnel, knowledge about employer needs and priorities, and how to build mutually beneficial relationships with employers. Most services providers felt they are not known to employers and, consequently, needed to increase their public education efforts, establish or expand their networks, and develop many more relationships with employers. This situation was certainly confirmed by employers who seldom knew where to turn for advice and support on disability matters. Given the complexity of disability, and the broad range of expertise needed by a full service organization, several service providers questioned whether it would be more appropriate for service providers to specialize in key areas.

Skills and Experience: Many labour force participants with disabilities are getting training but not jobs, and employers cannot find qualified workers with disabilities. This discrepancy suggests that training may not always be appropriate, and that work experience is lacking. Of course many employers also do not know what workers with disabilities are able and capable of doing – an understanding that would naturally flow from employing more people with disabilities. A better understanding of workplace accommodation and adaptable workplaces issues by employers would also increase their comfort level when considering workers with disabilities as candidates for employment. In order to close the gap between unemployment and work, disabled job seekers and employers both need to focus on enhancing their skills and experience. People with disabilities need to ensure their training is employer-needs driven and to seek every opportunity to gain work experience. Employers need to acquire skills in workplace accommodation and experience in employing people with disabilities.

Work-related training: Training is important when preparing to enter the workforce, but its value may be over-rated unless the training is practical and focused on the job. Since the amount of training has not necessarily increased employment levels of respondents, the appropriateness of the training received or the counselling received in advance of the training need to be questioned. Regardless, the findings suggest that closer links are required between counsellors and training providers, and the employers who face skills shortages. A majority of respondents felt that training that directly involves employers, that is comprehensive, and that focuses on skills shortage areas, are the essentials of the work preparation process.

Better job search tools and approaches: Successful job seekers found personal contacts, community employment services providers, the internet, and employment counsellors who specialize in serving job seekers with disabilities to be the most useful allies in their job search. Collectively, they hold the greatest promise for helping unemployed people with disabilities find jobs. They also suggest that further advantage could be gained through such measures as job finding networks with improved links to employers; training on how to do internet job searches; and the establishment of more coordinating agencies with qualified job development counsellors who have strong links to employers.

Employment - making it happen

People with disabilities, employment services providers, and a good number of employers who took part in Neglected or Hidden are all looking for ideas on what they could do to enhance the employment of people with disabilities. The following are the more promising ideas that emanated from the research.

Labour Force Participants with Disabilities:

- Develop a better understanding of employer concerns, why they place such an emphasis on qualifications, and why it is important to self-identify.

- Where skills need to be enhanced, seek access to training that directly involves employers, that is comprehensive, and that focuses on the skills shortages that face employers. Include components in “soft-skills”; job search techniques; interview skills; and understanding the competitive marketplace.
- Forget past job search frustrations; focus on enhancing initiative and motivation.
- Maximize internet use as a job search tool: visit employer web sites, study potential employers, prepare for employer contact, etc.
- Link up with service providers who employ job developers, who have good employer contacts, and who have access to workplace support services.

Employers

- Develop partnerships with community organizations that have the capacity to provide a one-stop-shop approach to employment referral and workplace support services for workers with disabilities. Help expand the partnership by encouraging other organizations and employers to join.
- Have qualified employment services providers or other experts provide training in workplace accommodation, adaptable workplaces, and other awareness issues.
- Enable human resources professionals to become an in-house resource or on employment and disability issues for the organization.
- Take the plunge! Hire a qualified worker with a disability and build receptiveness to the concept and more diversity to the workforce.

Employment Services Providers

- Assess whether your organization has the capacity to deliver a full range of quality employment preparation and referral services, or whether it should specialize in areas where it has the most expertise. Adjust approach accordingly.
- Partner with other service providers and employers on a one-stop-shop or coordinating agency approach to service delivery.
- Encourage government to financially support partnerships with other organizations and employers to pilot test the one-stop-shop or coordinating agency approach to employment services delivery.
- Ensure that counsellors are qualified to advise clients on such matters as skills shortage areas, employer expectations, and job demands.
- Become familiar with employer needs and priorities, and how to build links and mutually beneficial relationships with them.
- Ensure that job developers are on staff who know and understand employers, and are qualified and capable of building relationships / partnerships with them.
- Refer only those candidates to employers who have the skill set and qualifications employers need. Entice new employer partners with top quality candidates to help them gain exposure to, and confidence in, employing people with disabilities.

Government

- Support employment services providers on new directions in service delivery including such matters as: employer / service provider partnership development;

training on employer issues; approaches to job development; and workplace accommodation "how to" essentials.

- Consult with employment services providers on more flexible rules and approaches to the administration of disability benefits and supports, and an elimination of the disincentives for people with disabilities to enter the workforce.
- Explore options for the administration of benefit and support programs by key frontline NGOs as has been done with the likes of the Opportunities Fund and Employment Insurance-related programs.
- Explore wage "top-up" measures for those individuals not fully independent or competitive in the workplace. Support for assistive devices that would not be required by workers without a disability should be included in the funding analysis.
- Support the development of a focused employability awareness campaign that targets employers and enlists the participation and leadership of community organizations, labour force participants with disabilities, and employers.

One of the overarching findings in Neglected or Hidden is the incredible disconnect between employers, people with disabilities, and the service providers who help these individuals enter the workforce. The commitment and passion of workers with disabilities and those assisting them is sound. And more than enough employers across the country have opened their minds and opened their doors to workers with disabilities. While still in a significant minority, these employers are demonstrating that the challenges workers with disabilities face are resolvable. After all, some 800,000 people with disabilities are already employed in all sectors of the economy, but tens of thousands more are also waiting for the opportunity to do so.

Employers willing to provide jobs for people with disabilities have already discovered that there are many bottom-line reasons for building diversity into their workforce. They have found that a workplace culture that is diverse gives them a competitive edge. In fact, those organizations that have instilled a broadly inclusive workplace culture claim it gives them access to the best workers available in a time of skills shortages. They also see such tangible returns as improved decision making, less absenteeism, increased productivity, and an enhanced reputation as an employer of choice.

As we proceeded with our research, always in the back of our minds was the question: had people with disabilities been abandoned or disused by employers, or had they been somehow out of sight and out of mind? Our research may have uncovered some truths on both sides of this question. More importantly, however, we believe Neglected or Hidden has provided some important revelations on how to move beyond the questions and toward solutions. In the preceding pages we have brought together many promising ideas from the study's participants. Should each stakeholder act on even some of these ideas, we believe they will be well on their way to resolving the decades old problem of high unemployment facing people with disabilities across Canada.

Next Steps

Readers of Neglected or Hidden's detailed Research Report have been asked to share their thoughts and ideas on the study's findings. These will support the development of recommendations to stakeholders. They are also likely to add value to some of the tools now under development for service providers and employers including: best practices in recruiting and securing employment for people with disabilities; and "how-to" strategies on building effective relationships and networks between employers and organizations that help people with disabilities find work.

We encourage readers to periodically visit the EnableLink web site where these tools, even more Neglected or Hidden research findings, and other useful documents will be posted as they are completed.