

Member's Quarterly

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Feature

Developing an Accessible Workplace: Making it Better

Get rid of the formal and informal barriers



Members
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Staff Writer

Canada has come a long way when it comes to becoming an accessible society, but there is much more work to do and many barriers to the full access of people with disabilities into society and the workplace. This is important work because there are more than 6 million Canadians, aged 15 and over, who have a disability.

Improving access for people with disabilities has been a societal and political priority for many years. One key highlight was the Canadian ratification in 2010 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). By signing the UNCRPD, the Government of Canada recommitted to furthering the rights of persons with disabilities. What followed was the Accessible Canada Act (ACA) which made a goal to reach a barrier-free Canada by 2040.

The Accessible Canada Act came into force in 2019. It focused on the proactive identification, removal and prevention of barriers to accessibility in 7 priority areas including: employment, the built environment, information and communication technologies (ICT), communication other than ICT, the design and delivery of programs and services, the procurement of goods, services and facilities, and transportation.

It is not by chance that employment leads the priority areas since having a job is one of the best ways for people with disabilities to begin to become full partners in society. It provides economic independence and security as well as a sense of belonging and can be a much-needed boost to anyone's confidence. It is also heading the list of things to work on because there are still many formal and informal barriers that prevent people with disabilities from gaining access to the job market. In fact, less than 60 per cent of working-age Canadians who have a disability are employed, compared to 80 per cent of the general population.

The business case for hiring people with disabilities is a solid one. First of all, they are an available labour pool at a time when many employers are crying out for help at every level. Secondly, they bring unique talents and perspectives. They have already learned to overcome challenges and obstacles placed in their way and they know how to solve problems - because they have to, every day. They help diversify the workforce and inclusive businesses have been shown to be up to six times more likely to be innovative and agile. They also have higher than average revenue and profit margins and many increase their market share because they become more attractive to more customers.

Many organizations have already made major steps to improve their accessibility. Now is the time to do more, especially in recruitment and hiring. This might mean things like making accessible parking available closer to the workplace entrance, replacing steps at the building entrances with ramps with handrails and ensuring that there is easy access to washrooms, water fountains and employee lunchrooms.

Employers can also widen their job search criteria to make sure that people with disabilities are aware of opportunities within their organization. Some things to consider might be disability inclusion statements in job advertisements, posting job openings on disability-oriented job boards, ensuring that applications are in

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Feature continued

formats accessible to all people with disabilities and providing reasonable accommodations for applicants to ensure that they are able to fairly compete in any job interview or process.

It is also important to consider how you might conduct the actual interviews. That could mean making accommodations during the process or giving consideration to the whole of the candidates experience and background. For example, some people may be highly qualified for a technical position but not be able to communicate well. One other tip to make it fairer for people with disabilities to compete is to shed any preconceived ideas or prejudices about what a person with a disability might be capable of. Let them show or tell you.

After a person with a disability comes on board, they may need some physical accommodations to ensure their success at work. They may need a restructured work station or a modified computer with accessible capacity. Most of these accommodations can be provided with minimal cost and your new employee will most likely repay your efforts with an enthusiastic approach to their new job. A quick tour of their new jobsite will reveal any physical barriers that remain. Once the barriers are removed, the new hires and you can look forward to their ongoing success.

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