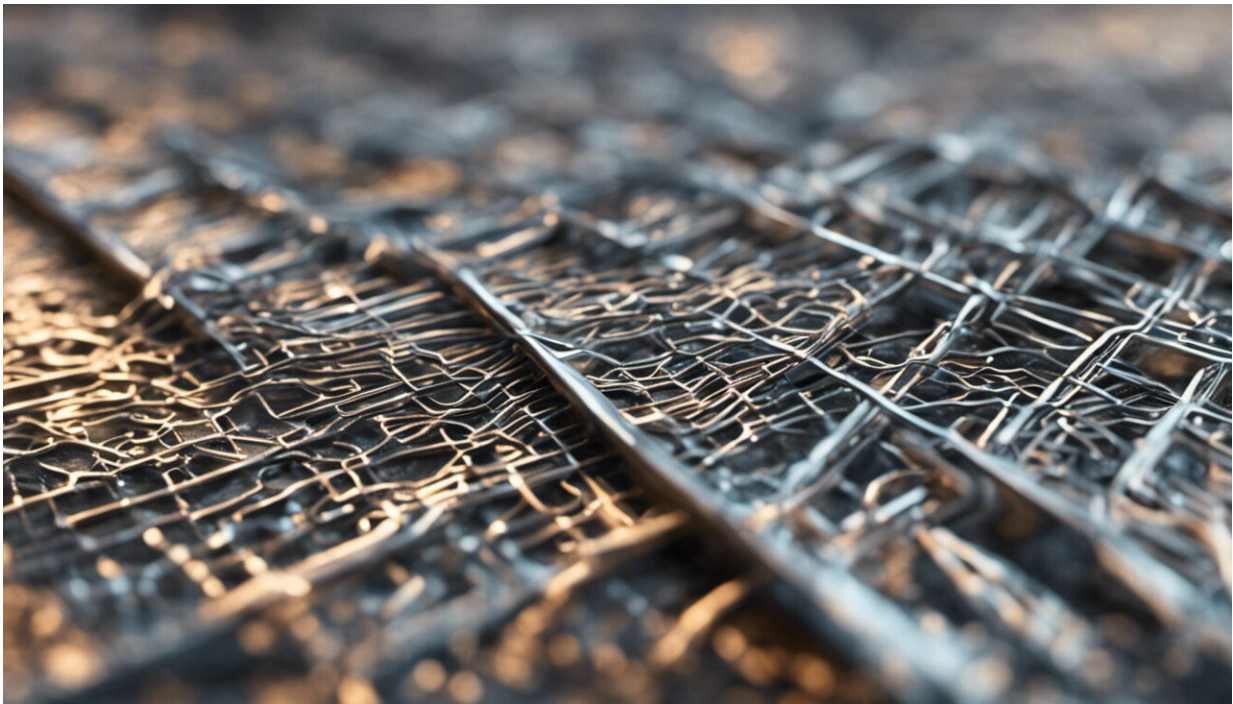


Employers miss out on talent by overlooking workers living with disabilities

July 26 2019, by Silvia Bonaccio



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Businesses increasingly see diversity in the workplace as positive for their operations, [according to a Conference Board of Canada survey of Canadian organizations](#).

But according to the same report, while there is a recognition that

diversity drives innovation and gives businesses an edge over competitors, people living with disabilities are the most underrepresented employment equity group in Canadian workplaces.

The economic benefits of workplace diversity hasn't demonstrably boosted opportunities for the [20 percent of working-age Canadians who live with a disability](#). According to Statistics Canada, people living with disabilities report challenges finding work and accessing opportunities for career growth.

Researchers know that a main reason for lower employment participation rates of people with disabilities is that employers often have prohibitive concerns and pessimistic ideas about hiring people with disabilities —[such as the view that it will be expensive](#) or candidates with disabilities aren't qualified.

But research I have conducted as part of the [Canadian Disability Participation Project](#) debunks such ideas. With Catherine E. Connelly (McMaster University), Ian R. Gellatly (University of Alberta), Arif Jetha (Institute for Work and Health) and Kathleen A. Martin Ginis (University of British Columbia) I found that [many of the most common employer concerns about hiring people with disabilities are unfounded](#).

Low-cost accommodations

A main concern frequently voiced by employers is the belief that accommodations are necessarily expensive.

In reality, accommodations actually cost much less than managers expect.

For example, the [Job Accommodation Network](#) has [tracked accommodation costs](#) recommended to client organizations over the past

15 years. They find that the majority of accommodations are cost-free. When an accommodation costs anything, the typical one-time cost is under \$500.

Although these figures are from the United States, they are relevant to the Canadian context. The most common accommodation requested by Canadian workers is [modified hours](#). [Flexibility in scheduling and the ways in which employees perform their jobs](#) gives them the autonomy to thrive in their work. Such accommodations don't require spending any extra money.

Flexible work arrangements have long been used to help employees balance work and personal needs. For example, people who train for [competitive sports](#) or parents of young children and often make use of flexible work schedules. The cost to implement flexible work doesn't change depending on who requests it.

Indeed, research finds that whether accommodations assist employees living with or without disabilities, [their reported costs and benefits are similar](#).

Employers should note that they offer work adjustments to a variety of employees. This change in mindset would go a long way in removing the stigma around accommodations.



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Talented employees

Employers may often also assume that [job applicants with disabilities are unqualified](#). In part, this prejudice comes from the word "disability," which many say [stresses a lack of ability](#).

In an employment context, all workers are hired based on their skills and abilities to perform tasks required by the job. Data collected by Statistics Canada indicates that [employers can be confident in the abilities and training of these job applicants](#). Yet it's estimated that close to 645,000 Canadians living with disabilities are currently unemployed despite their potential to work.

Employers also worry that workers living with disabilities will be poor

performers. Because of this concern, employers are missing out on talented employees.

For example, one study looked at the productivity of workers in distribution centers. Some of these workers lived with disabilities and some didn't. In most centers, [employees had similar levels of productivity and when there were differences, employees living with disabilities were often more productive.](#)

Many employees also do well in jobs where the duties exceed what may typically be expected for someone with a particular disability. For example, one study shows that people living with [spinal cord injury were performing jobs with considerable physical demands.](#)

Invisible disabilities

Some [employer](#) concerns persist in part because [employers do not realize how many](#) of their current employees live with a disability.

Disabilities such as arthritis or mental illness are invisible. As a result, employers may be unaware that some of their best employees live with a disability.

[Disclosing a disability](#) at work is a personal decision. Many employees prefer to keep their disability private unless they need an accommodation. Sometimes, when the work climate is seen as unsupportive, employees might even avoid requesting accommodations.

Untapped talent

As the Canadian labour pool continues to shrink due to an ageing workforce, workplaces will need to search for talent. People living with

disabilities represent a major underutilized source of talent.

Employers can ensure the [full participation](#) of people with disabilities by partnering with groups that support inclusive employment. This strategy [has proven to be effective](#), especially with people who are newly entering the workforce.

Organizations seeking a competitive edge in their industry should consider engaging people living with disabilities. Businesses or workplaces that hire inclusively are [more profitable](#). The bottom line is that hiring people with [disabilities](#) is good for business.

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