



Addressing Knowledge Gaps About Skills of Persons with Disabilities:

A Literature Review and Key Informant Interviews

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Higher Education and Future Inclusion in New Worlds of Work
for People with Disabilities

Principal Investigator: Emile Tompa, Executive Director, Inclusive
Design for Employment Access (IDEA)

Co-investigators: Sabrina Imam, Joann Varickanickal, Amir Mofidi,
Rebecca Gewurtz, Emma Irvin, Basil Southey

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Project background

- Currently there is little to no information on the foundational and transferable skill levels of persons with disabilities (PWDs)
- Study set out to address the gap in knowledge through a literature review and key informant interviews
- Four research questions at the centre of the study:
 1. What do we know about the foundational and transferable skill levels and employment outcomes?
 2. What are the main barriers faced by PWDs to increasing their skill levels and further integrating into the labour market?
 3. What are some proven or promising practices or avenues to address these barriers?
 4. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the skill development and labour market barriers of PWDs?

Literature review

- Rapid review methodology to address study research questions 1-3
- Sources included PsycINFO, ABI Inform, Scopus, and the internet
- Created a resource of 63 journal articles catalogued by country, study type, type of disability, research question(s) address in addition to the standard citation information
- Identified 12 targeted surveys that assess the skill levels and employment outcomes of PWDs
- Classified surveys by name of survey, year, country, whether has a disability focus, skill types, number of questions, skill measurement details, target population

Overview of key informant interviews

- Focused on research questions 2-4
- Canadian and international experts/knowledge leaders in the disability community, public policy arena, industry, labour, and academia
- Identified interviewees through our social innovation laboratory (IDEA) contact list and relied on a snowballing to find incremental candidate
- Interview process followed a semi-structured approach
- Interviews undertaken from March to June 2022

Interview questions

1. What are some examples of foundational and transferable skills that help PWDs secure employment?
2. Can you identify specific training initiatives/programs for persons with disability that effectively advance their skills for employment or help them find skill-matched employment?
3. Thinking about a time when skills training delivery failed, what would you say were the largest barriers to success?
4. How have gender, race, or other intersectional identities impacted skill training and employment for PWDs in your work?
5. How has the COVID-19 Pandemic affected skills development and employment opportunities for PWDs?

Interviewee profile

Category	Number
Interviews	13
Country	8 Canada, 4 United States, 1 Australia
Occupation	6 Directors, 2 Vice-Presidents, 1 Managers, 2 Owner/Co-Founder, 2 Professors
Organization	4 Academia, 5 Community Groups, 2 Canadian Government, 1 Business, 1 Social Enterprise

Summary of what we heard

Individual-, organizational-, and system-level consideration

- i. Mainstream training opportunities
- ii. Contextualize foundational and transferable skills training
- iii. Value and accommodate different learning styles
- iv. Promote barrier-free hiring approaches
- v. Promote on-the-job training opportunities
- vi. Consider the whole person and their needs
- vii. Provide training for supervisors, managers, and co-workers
- viii. Support careers, mentorship, and advancement

i. Mainstream training opportunities

- Critical for society to adopt a social model of disability
- Barriers exist at all levels of the educational system due to view that PWDs are unable to work
- Begins in secondary schools and continues into post-secondary educations
- PWDs are often not encouraged, or given an opportunity to take on part-time jobs, summer jobs or internships in high school and post studies
- Strong evidence that youth or young adult who has work experience during their studies substantially more likely to find a job and be successful in the labour-market after completing studies
- PWDs need to be integrated into the mainstream to avoid them being pigeonholed into pro-grams with low expectations

ii. Contextualize foundational and transferable skills training

- Skills that may help PWDs secure employment: 1) soft skills, 2) accessibility skills (e.g., ability to navigate environments and use system technology), and 3) technical skills (specific skills required for a particular job)
- But it is not helpful to solely focus efforts on advancing skills sets of PWDs, as they do not necessarily lack skills
- Abilities of PWDs are on a bell curve like any other populations within the labour market
- PWDs are diverse, as is the general population, and the focus on their skills gaps and skills training opportunities created exclusively for them may be misguided
- There are barriers to employment opportunities for even the most talented and skilled persons
- Even for those employed, it is often in entry-level jobs with little to no opportunities for advancement
- Better to work with an individual to explore what job may be a good match for them based on existing skills and interests, rather than focusing on skilling up the individual without a specific job opportunity in mind
- Every person has existing skills that can be supported and further honed, but these skills are not always emphasized in skills training programs

Quote on short-sightedness of training

“They are training first, when what needs to be examined are what are the actual skills required, and how do you prepare a person to be able to pivot from one position to another, to gain the skills they need to have a lifetime of employment, as opposed to fulfilling this particular gap that an employer may have right now. They are essentially creating disposable workers.”

iii. Value and accommodate different learning styles

- Need to accommodate different learning styles in educational programs
- Much of the discussion around different learning styles touched on neurodiversity and the need to address differences in the delivery of curriculum
- Different learning styles should not be viewed as having a deficit
- A lot of cognitive strengths come with these neurodivergences
- Cognitive differences can be a gift if they are aligned with the tasks in a particular field

“Their cognitive gifts made them so effective at their jobs”

iv. Promote barrier-free hiring approaches

- Multiple barriers are created by conventional hiring practices
- Online platforms for resume submission can be a particular barrier
- Screening software used to screen out candidates can be biased against PWDs
- A focus on resumes and interviews to assess a person's strengths and capabilities creates barriers, particularly for neurodivergent populations
- A better way to observe a person's skills and abilities is to have them demonstrate them through a task-based assessment process
- An approach being promoted in some sectors is on-the-job testing for 2-3 weeks, which provides an opportunity to observe both technical and soft skills capabilities
- internships are seen as a better way to identify and recruit talent, while at the same time providing candidates with training opportunities

v. Promote on-the-job training opportunities

- Many informants were quite critical of classroom training settings that mimicked real work context in a stripped-down manner
- Focus on experiential learning on-the-job—classroom skills training for employment purposes should be minimized
- Blend the educational setting and industry experiences, in order to better prepare youth and young adults for the job market
- Bringing industry representatives into the classroom setting in secondary and post-secondary schools
- On-the-job training can facilitate skills discovery and contextualize training opportunities, but training opportunities need to be in the competitive labour market
- Sheltered workshops in their various forms need to be dismantled

vi. Consider the whole person and their needs

- Take a “whole person approach to training,” where consideration is given to the needs of a person across all aspects of their lives
- An employment opportunity cannot work for a person unless all their life needs are addressed—consider the ecosystem of the person
- A range of wrap-around supports available through community services
- Also takes into consideration the skill needs for a lifetime of employment, rather than just the needs at a point in time in a specific job
- Value of support circles (team of people who support the individual) as a means for addressing multiple aspects of a worker’s needs in a particular employment situation

vii. Provide training for supervisors, managers, and co-workers

- Training for supervisors, managers and co-workers is critical to support diversity inclusion and belonging
- It could be an afternoon session where people are taught about autism, neurodiversity, what to expect from persons on the spectrum
- Provide an opportunity for people to ask questions and get comfortable with the idea of diversity
- Returns on training investments can be substantial
- Mainstream management training on disability inclusion in post-secondary management training programs

“when supervisors and the department is trained, the experience is phenomenal...it is not as big an undertaking as some might think.”

viii. Support careers, mentorship, and advancement

- Mentorship of PWDs to support career advancement was noted as an area that needed substantial development
- Many programs fail to look to the future—instead, they only address the immediate needs of the employer
- PWDs are often pigeonholed into entry-level positions and are rarely given opportunities for advancement
- Object of employment support services should be to support PWDs to find careers, not just jobs
- Career pathways may not necessarily be linear but should always have progression

“How do we shift out of celebrating someone in the same position at McDonald’s for 25 years?...To shifting the narrative from just employment to career development and growth across the lifespan”

Impact of intersectional Identities

- Respondents discussed the impacts of gender, race, and other intersectional identities on skill training and employment for PWDs
- When multiple factors contribute to the marginalization of an individual, it further reduces the available opportunities for employment
- Discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) often do not include disability
- Respondents emphasized the influence of race and culture—Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities do not see themselves represented amongst those who provide services, which can be alienating for them
- Online tools, visuals, questions, and content for skills training need to be culturally sensitive for PWDs to make connections with the content

“If service providers are helping others to develop their skills, if we’re not aware of those cultural lenses that might be at play, we can be working up against barriers that we don’t even know exist.”

Programs, services and other resources to support inclusive employment

Key informants identified a wealth of programs, services and other resources within Canada and internationally to support inclusive employment ... some examples from the 66 identified in the study report

1. Global Alliance on Accessible Technologies and Environments (GAATES) <http://gaates.org/>
2. The Global Initiative for Inclusive ICT <https://g3ict.org/>
3. Life Sherpa app (developed by Washington DC based group) <https://lifesherpapp.com/>
4. Optimize platform—web platform with training regime for persons with Autism based in Australia <https://optimize.com/neurodiversity-to-neuroinclusion/>
5. Neurodiversity Hub—community of practice <https://www.neurodiversityhub.org/>
6. Dandelion Program by DXC Technology (Australia)—program that is based on the ecosystem approach—team of people, consultant, tools www.dandelionprogram.com
7. Untapped Group—suite of ecosystem services with links to other platforms <https://www.untapped-group.com/>
8. Specialisterne—works with stakeholder around the world to support equal opportunities in the labour market for persons with neurodiversity <https://specialisterne.com/>
9. Autism Co-operative Research Centre (Australia) “myWAY Employability” initiative: <https://www.mywayemployability.com.au>
10. Disability: IN—Resources that empower businesses to achieve *disability* inclusion and equality <https://disabilityin.org/>

Thank you

Emile Tompa

Senior Scientist, Institute for Work & Health (IWH)
Executive Director, Inclusive Design for Employment Access (IDEA)
Director, Centre for Research on Work Disability Policy (CRWDP)
Associate Professor, Department of Economics, McMaster University



etompa@iwh.on.ca

Link to Full Report

<https://www.crwdp.ca/en/crwdp-reports#2023>



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info@vraie-idea.ca



Questions



Comments



Feedback



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