



# LESSONS IN LEARNING

**Strategies for overcoming  
barriers to training and  
education for Canadians  
with disabilities**

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According to *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the equality rights of Canadians with disabilities are protected under the law. Section 15 of the Charter states that every individual is equal under the law, and has equal protection “without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.”

In addition, the *Canadian Human Rights Act* requires employers and service providers under federal jurisdiction to accommodate—short of undue hardship—the needs of people with physical and mental disabilities. These provisions, along with additional legislation enacted by federal and provincial governments, are based on the recognition that a civil society must make every effort to ensure full participation in society for everyone. Efforts over the past three decades to ensure physical accessibility (from ramps to mechanical lifts) have been significant, but improving access to training and education promises to foster greater labour-force participation for Canadians with disabilities.

### Participation in the labour force among Canadians with disabilities

According to Statistics Canada, 4.4 million Canadians (or 14%) live with disabilities. For many of these individuals complete participation in the labour force remains elusive.<sup>2</sup> For example, compared to non-disabled Canadians more than twice the proportion of Canadians with disabilities are currently not in the labour force (i.e., neither employed nor actively seeking employment) and only 51% are employed compared to 75% of non-disabled Canadians (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

### Barriers to labour force participation and employment

Canadians with disabilities experience a number of different barriers to labour force participation, from mobility limitations that preclude employment to discriminatory hiring practices which impede them.

Inadequate skills and education can also present a barrier among those with disabilities. According to Statistics Canada, 17% of Canadians with a disability who are not in the labour force report that lack of adequate training is to blame.<sup>4</sup> Canadians with disabilities have markedly poorer literacy skills than non-disabled Canadians—this is especially true for those with learning disabilities, but also true for those with other types of disabilities.

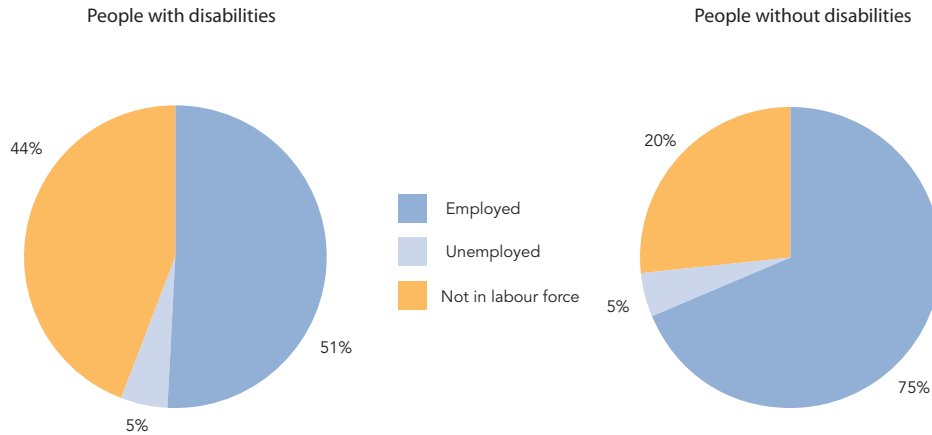
#### Disabilities in the Canadian Population

In the 2006 Census, 4.4 million Canadians reported that their everyday activities are limited because of a condition or health problem. These include:

- physical disabilities related to hearing, seeing, speech, mobility, agility, or pain;
- cognitive disabilities related to learning or memory;
- developmental disabilities; and
- psychological disabilities.

Among adults, the most commonly reported disabilities are those related to pain, mobility and agility: nearly three million adults (11% of the adult population) report at least one of these disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1:**  
Labour force outcomes for Canadians, with and without disabilities



Source: Statistics Canada - Participation and Activity Limitation Survey of 2006: Labour Force Experience of People with Disabilities in Canada

According to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), 37% of adult Canadians without disabilities have low literacy compared to 49% of Canadians with disabilities, and 77% of those with learning disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, Canadians with disabilities have lower levels of educational attainment than non-disabled Canadians. For example, 37% of adults with a disability do not have a high-school diploma, compared to 25% of non-disabled Canadians.<sup>6</sup>

Stronger skills and more education may be key to greater labour force participation and employment among Canadians with disabilities. While the relationships between disability, education, employment and literacy are complex, it is clear that disabilities and literacy can have compounding effects.

Individuals with disabilities often encounter barriers to education, which in turn impede the development of their literacy skills. This may serve to discourage these individuals with disabilities from pursuing further educational opportunities, resulting in fewer employment opportunities through their lives. Unemployment further limits work-related opportunities to practice and develop literacy skills, which can contribute to the overall erosion of literacy skills.<sup>7</sup>

### Barriers to education and training for disabled Canadians

If stronger skills and more education are key to greater labour force participation, then it is important to identify critical barriers to education and training for Canadians with disabilities. In 2008, the Canadian Council on Learning's Adult Learning Knowledge Centre funded a *Community Outreach Initiative for Learners with Disabilities* that focused on those living in Atlantic Canada. The *Independent Living Resource Centre (ILRC)* in Halifax, N.S. was selected to engage in research within the disability communities in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Through partner organizations in each province, respondents were asked a series of questions about; their individual disabilities, their experiences with adult learning, the barriers they had encountered as learners, and the strategies and changes they recommended for overcoming those barriers.<sup>8</sup>

The main barriers encountered by learners with disabilities were:

- **Physical accessibility** In many cases, buildings or classrooms were inaccessible, in other cases accessible public transportation was not available and learners had no way to travel to learning opportunities.
- **Financial issues** Programs and courses were often unaffordable for learners with disabilities, who also find it difficult to successfully negotiate the administrative demands of applying for student aid.
- **Attitudes** Learners with disabilities reported that their instructors did not always allow for the disability related resources that they required to learn, such as note-takers or additional time for tests.

### Lesson in Learning: Strategies for overcoming barriers to training and education for Canadians with disabilities

How can Canadians with disabilities overcome barriers to adult education and training in order to develop stronger skills and improve their labour force outcomes? Respondents to the ILRC community outreach project made several recommendations to assist in addressing the physical and societal barriers they face.

Several common themes emerged, including the importance of:

- securing funding accessible to learners with disabilities;
- providing accessible transportation and building/classrooms;
- providing alternative formats for learning and testing;
- creating peer support networks and services for adult learners with disabilities; and
- establishing disability awareness training for educators.

Across Canada, a number of initiatives have been developed in order to help Canadians with disabilities pursue post-secondary education and other forms of training.

The *National Education Association of Disabled Students* has developed an outreach project for high school students with disabilities who are making the transition to post-secondary institutions. The project and its accompanying guide book, *Moving On*, can assist students with disabilities in making informed choices regarding their academic options and provide them with information about the financial aid and accommodations available to them at various institutions. The book also lists resources and non-governmental organizations which can assist students in overcoming obstacles to full participation in post-secondary studies.

Transition programs are a useful way for students with disabilities to determine what they should expect when entering a post-secondary institution. The Toronto-based *DiscoveryAbility* helps students with disabilities make the transition from high school to post-secondary studies, or to the workforce. *DiscoveryAbility* supplies information to students seeking post-secondary programs, appropriate careers and accommodations and employment training.

*The Independence Program* (or “T.I.P.”) assists young adults with disabilities to test and develop the skills needed for day-to-day independent living while pursuing a post-secondary education. Participants live in a dormitory at the University of Toronto for three weeks where they begin to develop independence and learn to cope with activities such as grocery shopping, cooking, laundry, getting around the city with public transportation, and managing their own support requirements.

The Canada Student Loans Program promotes accessibility for post-secondary students with permanent disabilities by offering financial assistance and enrolment options in reduced course loads while maintaining full or part-time status. Students with disabilities are also eligible to receive grants which contribute towards living costs associated with their disability. These grants include the *Canada Access Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities* and the *Canada Study Grant for the Accommodation of Students with Permanent Disabilities*.

Inclusive post-secondary education is an emerging field aimed at fully integrating students with developmental disabilities into the post-secondary learning environment. Inclusive post-secondary education fosters individual talents and capacities in environments where students with varying abilities are enrolled in the same class. Currently, the majority of post-secondary programs for students with developmental disabilities are restricted to workplace skills training programs that operate within the post-secondary environment, but separate from regular classes. Integrated inclusive post-secondary education represents an emerging field of post-secondary accessibility which goes beyond workplace training.<sup>9</sup>

The *Adult Connections in Education Program* at the University of Prince Edward Island, is an inclusive post-secondary education program geared toward academic enhancement and personal growth for students with intellectual disabilities. The program combines classes, study, extracurricular activities, time with peers, and work experience.

*STEPS Forward* began in 2001 with a mandate to transform post-secondary education in British Columbia by normalizing the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities. The initiative focuses on developing social skills in order to enhance social and working relationships for students who are intellectually disabled.

### Conclusion

Research has shown that the greatest returns on investment in training and education accrue to those who have the lowest levels of education.<sup>10</sup>

As Canadians with disabilities are more likely than their non-disabled counterparts to be without a high-school diploma, they are likely to derive the greatest benefits from investments in their education and training. Efforts to overcome barriers to learning and, ultimately, improve labour-force outcomes, promise to yield economic, social and equity benefits.

### References

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