

Employment of Persons with Disabilities in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises[[1]](#footnote-1)

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## Executive Summary: Overview[[2]](#footnote-2)

### Top 3 Practices for SME Leadership

* Assume non-disclosure
* Provide accommodations to all team members as part of onboarding process
* Emphasize productivity and engagement in accommodation process

### Top 3 Challenges for PWD Employees

* Necessity of disclosure for accessing accommodations
* Closed workplace cultures that limit discussions of accessibility
* Perception disability is barrier to career advancement

### Top 3 Initiatives for Policy Makers

* Provide easy, centralized hub for accessibility information
* Create financial incentives for major built or digital infrastructure
* Be a role model for accessibility in the workplace

### Executive Summary

At the request of Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), The Return on Disability Group (RoDG) was engaged to assess how Canadian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can best integrate and maximize the contributions of People with Disabilities (PWD). This report outlines the findings by RoDG’s team of experts, who conducted a focus group with PWD employed at Canadian SMEs, interviewed business leaders at Canadian SMEs with a reputation for inclusive hiring and an engaged workforce, and conducted an environmental scan of accessibility at Canadian SMEs.

The goal of this report is to identify leading practices in hiring, retaining and maximizing the contributions of PWD in the Canadian SME context. This is not simply an exercise in inclusive hiring. Rather, this report is intended to enable Canadian SME executives to maximize the contributions of a population group they are already employing – often without realizing it. It is also intended to push back on some of the misconceptions and suboptimal practices that prevent businesses from maximizing the productivity of their existing talent pool, and missing out on top talent available in the marketplace.

During the course of this research, RoDG identified several best practices and insights that can be leveraged to both increase the hiring and retention of top PWD, and to translate this human capital to increased financial returns. We include 32insights that highlight the current knowledge on employing PWD in the SME context, and the results of our focus group of PWD and interviews with SME leaders.

These insights can be incorporated into hiring and employee engagement practices, and downloaded to individual management teams. Of primary importance is a proactive stance on accommodations, emphasizing what team members need to be most effective, and abandoning the assumption that PWD will disclose their disabilities. One advantage that SMEs have compared to large organizations is greater communication between executives and team members. This should be leveraged to create an environment in which productivity adjustments can be easily offered, requested, and provided.

In addition to strategies for SME leaders, RoDG’s research highlighted several areas in which the federal government can serve as an effective “gap filler” – providing resources that individual SMEs, especially small businesses, would be unlikely or unable to muster on their own. One of the most important resources here is information, especially surrounding accommodation costs, as well as providing simple and transparent financial incentives for major changes to built or digital environments.

RoDG has included two sets of recommendations, one for SME leadership, and one for the Government of Canada. The intent of each is to create policies and processes that enable SMEs to attract and maximize the abilities of Canada’s PWD population, thus creating value. As with all talent pools, processes must maximize engagement and productivity to be sustainable.

## Background and Context

### SMEs as Canadian Employers

Small enterprises in Canada are those that have less than 100 employees, while medium-sized enterprises have between 100-499 employees. Collectively, SMEs are the most common business organizations and employers in Canada. In December 2021, there were 1.19 million small businesses in Canada (97.9% of all businesses), and 22,700 medium sized businesses (1.9% of all businesses). Combined, SMEs employed 88.1% of the private labour force in Canada.[[3]](#footnote-3)

### People with Disabilities in the Canadian Workforce

According to Statistics Canada, more than 6.2 million Canadians - almost 22% of the Canadian population aged 15 or older - currently manages some form of disability.[[4]](#footnote-4) While discussions of disability often revolve around wheelchair access, sign language, and service animals, the vast majority of PWD manage disabilities that are effectively invisible to others.

While people acquire disabilities with age, this should not be interpreted that accessibility is an “issue” only within senior and retired populations. 20% of Canadians between the ages of 25 and 65 – working age Canadians – currently have a disability.[[5]](#footnote-5) Moreover, those in the labour force without disabilities are more likely to acquire a disability over time. Keeping these individuals in the workforce requires taking accessibility seriously.

Data on PWD in the workforce is poor. According to Statistics Canada, PWD are significantly underemployed as a population group, with only 59.4% of working age PWD currently employed full time. Yet, a US-based study by Coqual has suggested that up to 30% of “white collar” roles are currently held by PWD – a number slightly higher than the natural population distribution.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Some PWD require workplace accommodations in order to maximize their productivity. According to Statistics Canada, 37% of PWD aged 25 to 64 required at least one workplace accommodation. Of this group, 59% had their needs met, while 19% had some of their needs met. Crucially, of the 21% that had none of their needs met, 69% indicated this was because they did not disclose their disability to their employer.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The issue of disclosure drives both poor outcomes and poor data collection. Numerous studies – along with research by RoDG – have demonstrated that the majority of PWD will never disclose their disability to their employer. Those that do are most likely those that have visually obvious disabilities such as wheelchair users.[[8]](#footnote-8) Due to perceived stigma, there is virtually no incentive for those with invisible disabilities to disclose. This, combined with Coqual’s findings and the size of the population with disabilities, SMEs are almost certainly employing large numbers of PWD. They just don’t know it.

## Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to identify and fill gaps in knowledge on the employment PWD in Canadian SMEs. This study will identify trends in hiring and retention, best and emerging practices on the integration of PWD into the SME workforce, and the organizational culture of disability inclusion in SMEs.

### Identify and fill gaps in knowledge > Revenue focused

Using a multi-pronged approach, identify what information SME executives need to act decisively in maximizing PWD talent. Fill gaps by leveraging insights of other top SME employers, and by understanding the experience of PWD working in SME environments. Tie this knowledge to key business drivers to create sustainable process.

### Understanding PWD preferences > Focus on experience

Identify patterns in what PWD want in an employer for SMEs to attract the best talent within the disability marketplace. Emphasize the experience of workers in a work environment, rather than standards detached from individual preference or performance.

### Identify best practices > Emulate success

Leveraging the experience of PWD and SME executives employed across Canadian industry, provide a “north star” of best practices that can be used to as a reference point to develop sustainable processes for readers of this report.

### Map PWD barriers to core experience > “Ease-of-use” for all

When compiled in a report – this research informs future process design and seeds the thought process when challenges arise. Principles maximizing the productivity of all team members become part of core process design.

### Reframing PWD talent market for SMEs > New language

By collecting the observations and insights of employment experiences of PWD in SMEs, we can apply these insights to make the customer experience better for the core team members. The goal is to design from disability not for disability.

## Research Design

### Research Questions

The overall purpose of this study is to identify and fill gaps in knowledge on the employment PWD in Canadian SMEs. This includes identifying trends in hiring and retention, best and emerging practices on the integration of PWD into the SME workforce, and the organizational culture of disability inclusion in SMEs. Specifically, this study asks four (4) questions:

1. For SMEs that have a good track record in hiring PWDs, what were the challenges faced, and how were they overcome?
2. How can SMEs make PWDs an asset to the organization?
3. What can SMEs do to accommodate Persons with disability issues that may be perceived as “severe”?
4. What do SMEs believe is the disconnect between the supply and demand of PWDs in the labour market?

### Research Design

One of the key issues in conducting research on how SMEs can better integrate PWD into their workforce, is that many PWD do not disclose their disability at all. As discussed in the previous section, this means many SMEs likely employ PWD without realizing they are doing so. For this reason, a research strategy focusing only on SME leaders would at best be incomplete.

To overcome the issue of disclosure, RoDG adopted a multi-phase research design. Crucially RoDG sought insights from both PWD employed at SMEs, and SME leaders. The former allowed RoDG to probe on what practices and processes made certain SMEs more attractive as an employer, while also identifying the pain points that would lead to disengagement and/or leaving a position. These insights can then be juxtaposed against the current situation at top SME employers, identifying potential gaps that employers may be unaware of, while also highlighting practices attractive to PWD that employers may not be deliberately cultivating for this purpose. This three-phase research approach is outlined below.

#### Phase 1 – Environmental Scan

##### Scan of Accessibility Commitments in Top Canadian SME Employers

To get a sense of accessibility commitments, policies, and goals, RoDG first conducted a scan of visible accessibility commitments in Canada’s top SME employers. To determine the initial list of top employers, RoDG used a list of Canada’s top small and medium employers, as evaluated by Mediacorp.[[9]](#footnote-9) RoDG analysts then examined all public facing materials for evidence of commitments surrounding accessibility. This not only provided a sense of what leading SMEs were currently publicly discussing in disability, but also allowed RoDG analysts to identify potential leaders to approach for interviews in the third phase of research.

##### Literature Review of PWD Employment in SMEs (beyond Canada)

Given the lack of current data on PWD in the Canadian SME context, RoDG conducted a literature review of public and academic literature on PWD in the SME context globally. While information in this area is light, this yielded some insights that inform our general observations, while also providing initial hypothesis that could be probed in a focus group with PWD, and in interviews with executives.

#### Phase 2 – Focus Group of PWD Employed in Canadian SME

##### Recruit PWD Employees

In order to gain maximum insight, The Return on Disability Group sources and recruits PWD across Canada who are both accomplished and able to articulate the factors in their workplace experience that drives their engagement and willingness to apply to, and stay, in an SME environment. Participants receive an honourarium.

##### Probe on Experiences: Open ended

Participants participated in a two hour focus group, during which time RoDG analysts probed on workplace experiences. The core themes of the focus group were general experiences, applying for jobs, hiring and onboarding, workplace culture and support, accommodations, and career development. Questions were intentionally open ended, allowing participants to guide the conversation. This practice allows for new learnings to emerge, rather than testing the assumptions of the analysts.

##### Capture “Wow” and “Ow” Moments

Within the context of the core focus group themes, RoDG analysts listen for, and probe on, experiences that result in employee delight, or those that create a poor workplace experience. The goal is to identify processes that regularly delight employees, thus increasing productivity and engagement, while minimizing negative experiences that may lead to disengagement or the pursuit of opportunities elsewhere.

#### Phase 3 – Interviews with Canadian SME Executives

##### Identify Leading SMEs

Leveraging insights from Phases 1 and 2, RoDG identified and approached executives in organizations that were likely to be top employers of PWD. These employers were identified by their public commitments to accessibility, and/or positive public feedback from employees or media outlets. RoDG requested the participation of one executive per SME to be interviewed for this study.

##### Probe Experiences with PWD

In interviews with executives, RoDG probed on experiences hiring and working with PWD. This included conversations about hiring, management, disclosure practices, accommodations, and employee engagement. This conversation was open ended, allowing new insights to emerge. Interviews with executives lasted 45 minutes, and participants received an honourarium.

##### Capture “Wow,” “Ow” and “I wish I Knew”

Like with focus group participants, RoDG analysts captured and probed upon those moments of working with PWD that led to delight, as well as those experiences that were more challenging. Of particular interest for this study were those situations in which executives professed to not having, or wanting additional, information when it came to working with PWD. This suggests gaps in knowledge that can be filled with experience research, leading to better outcomes for both employers and team members.

## Demographics – PWD Employees in SMEs

##### The following table gives an overview of the recruited PWD employee participants

Number of participants: 12

Female: 8

Male: 4

Average Age: 32 years old

##### Functional disability

Cognitive: 7

Physical: 5

Vision: 6

Hearing: 1

(note: total exceeds 12, as participants may manage more than 1 functional disability.)

##### Highest level of education attained

College: 2

Bachelors: 7

Masters: 3

##### Types of Industries

Childcare: 1

Finance: 1

Food and Hospitality: 2

Healthcare: 3

Non-Profit: 1

Retail: 1

Technology: 2

Urban Planning: 1

Table 1: PWD Participant Demographics

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participant** | **Gender** | **Age** | **Disability** | **Education Level - Degree**  | **Employment Industry** |
| 1 | F | 25 | Cognitive | Masters | Urban Planning |
| 2 | F | 27 | Cognitive | Bachelors | Technology |
| 3 | M | 37 | Vision/ cognitive | Bachelors | Food and Hospitality |
| 4 | F | 53 | Vision/ cognitive | Bachelors | Childcare |
| 5 | M | 24 | Physical/ cognitive | Bachelors | Technology |
| 6 | F | 27 | Vision | Masters | Healthcare |
| 7 | F | 27 | Physical | Bachelors | Healthcare |
| 8 | F | 36 | Physical | Masters | Healthcare |
| 9 | M | 30 | Vision | Bachelors | Food and Hospitality |
| 10 | F | 41 | Physical/cognitive/vision | College | Non-profit  |
| 11 | F | 28 | Vision/hearing | College | Finance |
| 12 | M | 27 | Physical/Cognitive | Bachelors | Retail |

## Demographics – SME Executives

##### The following table gives an overview of the recruited SME Leaders

Number of participants: 5

Female: 2

Male: 3

##### Types of Industries

Food and Hospitality: 1

Service Design/Consulting: 1

Law: 1

Insurance: 1

Technology: 1

Table 2: SME Leaders and their Industry

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Participant** | **Gender** | **Employment Industry** |
| 1 | M | Food and Hospitality  |
| 2 | M | Service Design/Consulting |
| 3 | F | Law |
| 4 | F | Insurance |
| 5 | M | Technology |

## Environmental Scan and Literature Review: PWD in SMEs

To date there has been limited data collection on the experience of PWD in Canadian SMEs, what workplace practices and processes are likely to enable firms to better hire and retain PWD workers, and why there is a disconnect between supply and demand in PWD labour markets. As a way of starting to fill this data gap, RoDG conducted both an environment scan of public-facing accessibility materials in SMEs, and a literature review of existing studies on PWD employment in SMEs outside of Canada. While noting neither small or large firms necessarily get this right, the most compelling reasons for the disconnect between PWD worker supply and demand are perceived costs of accommodations and attitudes towards PWD as team members. At the same time, these accommodations can be important for retaining PWD team members.

### Environmental Scan

RoDG conducted an environmental scan of outward commitments to accessibility, including in the hiring process, in the Canadian SME context. Given there are over 1.3 million SMEs in Canada, reviewing the entire universe of SMEs would have been an impossible undertaking. RoDG thus analyzed the public-facing materials of 50 Canadian SMEs identified by Mediacorp as top small and medium employers in 2022. RoDG identified three key trends in this scan.

#### Outward Commitments Low

Even among highly regarded SME employers, outward commitments to accessibility are low. Only 24 of the top 50 SME employers sampled by RoDG have an outward commitment to accessibility. This is not to say the commitment is substantive, only that it exists at all. These commitments ranged from 2-3 sentences to multi-year accessibility plans tied to boilerplate policies driven by provincial regulation.

#### Commitment as Compliance

At present only three provinces that mandate provincial accessibility standards: Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Ontario. 22 out of the 24 SMEs with a public accessibility commitment are based in at least one of these provinces. For the two SMEs outside these provinces that have a public commitment to accessibility, these commitments are minimal: an anti-discrimination policy, and a three-sentence declaration of accessibility absent details or resources. SMEs outside these provinces were unlikely to have any public commitment.

#### Not a Priority Area

Based on the previous two observations, it is obvious that public commitments to accessibility are not a priority for Canadian SMEs. While there are a number who have distinguished themselves by having significant public commitments, these are far outside the norm, even amongst those SMEs with a reputation as being great places to work.

### Literature Review

#### Assumptions About PWD Workers

One of the largest barriers in “making” PWD workers an asset to an organization, as well as the mismatch between PWD worker supply and demand, are attitudes and assumptions about PWD. In addition to well-documented discrimination against PWD workers in a general sense, there also tends to be assumptions about role suitability based on disability “type”. It has been noted that employers tend to view those with physical and sensory disabilities more favorably than cognitive disabilities.[[10]](#footnote-10) Other studies note that hiring managers may view some disability “types” as more suited for particular tasks without evidence. For example, assigning blind team members to customer facing roles disproportionately.[[11]](#footnote-11)

#### Neither Small nor Large Firms are Better Employers of PWD

In a major review of existing studies of PWD experience across organizational size, it was found that outside of feelings of work-life balance, there was no statistical difference in how PWD rated their work experience.[[12]](#footnote-12) As discussed further below, this is likely due to an inherent trade off: while smaller organizations can cultivate greater flexibility and more personal relationships, larger organizations have more dedicated resources for requests such as accommodations, as well as more transparent processes for their procurement.

#### Smaller Firms More Personal

There is often a direct relationship between firm size and the formalization of processes, including those related to disability. Smaller firms often grant additional autonomy and superior work-life balance.[[13]](#footnote-13) While these processes exist in large organizations, in smaller ones they are more personal, with fewer bureaucratic characteristics. This makes considerations of disability likely to be less formal, with fewer established bureaucratic channels.[[14]](#footnote-14)

There are numerous studies suggesting that smaller on-site employers are likely to cultivate closer working relationships with regular personal contact. This in turn may make immediate supervisors more likely to gauge PWD employees favorably, given they can directly observe their effort and job performance (for a review, see Bacon and Hoque: The treatment of disabled individuals in small, medium-sized, and large firms).

#### Larger Firms Have More Infrastructure and Oversight

There is an inherent trade off in PWD experience and management between more personal and informal working environments. While the former provides flexibility and the potential for more direct interaction with managers, the latter provides standard process and oversight. Larger organizations are more likely to adopt recruitment standards (including those targeting PWD), formal assessments of workplace accessibility, and more formalized return to work programs.[[15]](#footnote-15) A clear benefit of these programs is that it provides a greater degree of certainty as to an employers willingness to provide accommodations. Done properly, it can also mean a more inclusive hiring process.

#### Accommodation Costs Greater Concern for Smaller Organizations

A concern that is frequently noted for the hiring of PWD is the potential cost of accommodations. This is especially the case for small organizations that may have little operational budget.[[16]](#footnote-16) Even with tax credits available, the perceived cost of accommodations is a barrier in small organizations considering hiring PWD. Part of this reason may be that smaller businesses are less familiar with tax incentives and claim procedures.[[17]](#footnote-17)

#### Accommodation Costs often Minimal

There is little research on how many PWD are likely to request accommodation, and what the cost of these accommodations likely are. In the most recent Job Accommodation Survey, 56% of employers indicated the accommodation for their employee that needed it cost nothing. 39% indicated a one-time expense, with a median cost of $500. Only 4% of accommodations incurred an annual cost to the company.[[18]](#footnote-18)

These numbers should be treated with a degree of skepticism. A 2007 study of small businesses in the US found that only 15.7% of small businesses reported paying for accommodation requests.[[19]](#footnote-19) Crucially, the most frequently requested accommodation is flexible work arrangements, either via location or scheduling. Smaller businesses may have these arrangements naturally built into their working model. It is also essential to note that almost all accommodation regimes require disclosure, which varies wildly depending on work culture.

#### Accommodation Benefits Extend Beyond Productivity

There are some indications that providing accommodations provided additional value to organizations beyond increased productivity for the individual receiving them. Over 50% of employers in the most recent Job Accommodation Network survey indicated that providing accommodations increased overall company morale, while 49% indicated it increased company productivity overall. 46% also indicated accommodations increased safety. In 90% of cases, accommodations allowed a company to retain a valued employee.[[20]](#footnote-20)

### Conclusion

There is little research on PWD working in SMEs, especially in the Canadian context. Where research exists, it is overwhelmingly focused on issues of disclosure and accommodations. Missing from this research is the experience of both PWD workers and SME leaders: what makes a good or poor workplace environment, how do employers maximize the productivity of their PWD talent, and what are the relative costs and benefits of these decisions. RoDG’s research on these factors in the Canadian SME context are the contents of the following two sections.

## Experience of PWD as Team Members in SMEs

For organizations to be successful in attracting and retaining talented PWD team members, it is essential to understand their wants, pain points, and moments of delight as employees – including during the hiring process. RoDG analysts probed on all of these issues. These insights are organized around three key themes: hiring and onboarding, workplace accommodations, and workplace culture/attitudes. It should be noted that focus group participants did not bring up issues such as built environments, rather, much of the conversation focused on attitudes and workplace flexibility.

### Hiring and Onboarding

#### PWD Believe their Disability to be a Liability during Hiring Process

*“It would be nice to have interviews over the phone. This is because I feel like when somebody sees me with my cane and guide dog, judgements are made even before I’m asked anything.”* | *“I would prefer not to [disclose] because I find I won’t get the interview.”*

There was a universal belief amongst focus group participants that they are at a hiring disadvantage when recruiters are aware of their disability. This is true for both visible and invisible disabilities. For those with invisible disabilities, this means there is a general reluctance to disclose their disability during the hiring process, instead choosing to do so at a later time post-hire (if they choose to disclose at all). For those with more visible disabilities, there can be a preference for phone or virtual interviews that both make many disabilities less obvious, and that also tend to include built-in accessibility features such as closed captioning.

#### Preference for Accommodation Offer During Hiring Process

*“Asking if I need an accommodation at the end of the interview as opposed to explaining the job and asking if I’ll be able to do it properly.”*

While PWD are reluctant to self-identify during the interview process, study participants noted that they would be more open to doing so if the topic of accommodation was proactively brought up by organizations at the start of the interview process and continuously throughout it. From a recruiter’s perspective, this also enables more candidates to be at their best during the hiring process, allowing for better comparison of candidates.

#### Encouragement for PWD Applicants Viewed Cynically

*“I think that language is just to weed us out. That’s why they want to encourage us to disclose. If you disclose, you are limiting yourself.”* | *“They just put that statement there because the government says they have to. When you look through their website, or fill out the form to apply, nothing is accessible.”*

There is a perception among PWD that inclusive language written in job postings (such as language encouraging minorities or PWD to apply) is a formality to comply with regulation, rather than a genuine attempt at workplace diversity. This perception stems from lived experiences, especially regarding societal attitudes towards disability and PWD. More generally, most PWD do not apply for careers on the basis of general commitments to inclusion, rather – like those without disabilities – the decision to apply for a position is based on prospects of career success, broadly defined.

#### Lack of Communication when PWD Join Team

*“HR doesn’t inform the team of your disability. So when you show up for work, you feel their shock or discomfort, or lack of readiness to receive you.”*| *“I find not all people in the process get the update that they’re going to interact with a blind person using a guide dog. So I show up and it’s a dramatic kind of day […] A lot of times they’re just shocked!”*

One issue noted by several participants who either had an obvious disability or disclosed prior to their first day, was that hiring managers or HR departments do not always brief teams that they may have additional accommodation strategies. This leads to an uncomfortable onboarding process for both the new worker and pre-existing team members.

#### Large Organizations Perceived as Having Additional Resources

*“[Large corporations] have much better benefits and flexibility. Because they are bigger, they have more employees and separation between people I would talk to about accommodation and the person I would be reporting to.”* | *“I applied to large companies that I knew supported blind people. The smaller companies [I was] more hesitant.”*

Participants noted that in some instances large organizations can be more preferable employers due to their accessibility concerns. This belief stems from three assumptions. First, that it is easier to collect information on employment experiences in large organizations, making them more predictable employers. Second, there is a belief that larger organizations have a larger accessibility budget, which can be a concern for those needing more costly accommodations. Third, there is a perception that large organizations have more bureaucratic processes, allowing PWD to access accommodations without having to go through their direct manager. It should be noted that none of these assumptions are necessarily true, and SMEs can take steps to ensure none of these are factors in their business.

### Workplace Accommodations

#### Requesting Accommodations can be Difficult: Manager Dependent

*“How comfortable I feel with my boss [determines if I’m] asking for an accommodation”* | *“My manager is constantly talking about results […] This doesn’t make me feel comfortable asking [for an accommodation]”*

One of the most significant pain points for study participants was the process of requesting accommodations. Specifically, participants indicated their willingness to request the tools needed to be most productive depended almost entirely on their perception of their individual manager. While in some cases this can lead to easily securing accommodations, in others, participants indicated they would forego accommodations entirely, thus inhibiting their ability to work effectively.

#### Flexibility as Crucial Accommodation

*“To make my work experience better, I would like to have the flexibility to complete work at my own pace and take a walk or short break if needed.”*

Participants indicated a flexible work environment was crucial to their engagement and workplace success. Participants indicated their productivity went up during the Covid-19 Pandemic as they were now working from home, and thus could build this flexibility into their daily routines. Our conversations, in this study and others, have discovered that PWD adjust and adapt to things and process not designed for their use. Flexibility makes these adjustments more effective and more efficient. Crucially for employers, this type of accommodation is costless when implemented well.

### Workplace Culture/Attitudes

#### Disability as “Taboo” Topic

*“[Co-workers/managers] avoid this topic. Part of it is not wanting to offend PWD.”*

Participants noted that it is often difficult to discuss disability or accessibility concerns in the workplace. Participants attributed this to a combination of lack of education, and discomfort on behalf of managers of saying the “wrong” thing and causing offense. In practice, this makes it difficult for PWD to articulate their concerns and creates barriers in requesting items such as accommodations. It should be noted that this practice is less reflective of individual employers, and more reflective of societal attitudes towards disability writ large.

#### Assumption PWD are Accessibility Experts

*“I believe I am the main source of information [on disability] at my company.”*

Due both to a lack of company resources and a general discomfort surrounding disability, some participants indicated that they are often forced to be the main resource on disability and/or accessibility in their respective workplace. Not only are PWD unlikely to be accessibility experts in general, beyond their own individual needs, this additional work is almost always outside their regular work duties, creating additional unpaid work burdens that must be managed.

#### Belief that Stigma Inhibits Career Advancement

*“Four other blind people have worked at my company for 30 years. They have been denied going up the ladder.”* | *“Even if you apply [for higher positions], the chances of getting hired are minimal”*

In general, participants believe that stigma against PWD greatly hampers career development and other professional opportunities. One reason for this is that career success may often be based on attendance, or time spent “clocked-in,” rather than more flexible metrics that consider a particular employee’s strengths. Moreover, a lack of flexibility with accommodations also prevents PWD from pursuing certain positions that they would not be able to hold without their accommodation transferring with them. Coupled with a desire to not “rock the boat” due to this perceived stigma, PWD may opt to remain in their current positions rather than fully advocate for themselves to achieve higher level positions.

## Interviews with Canadian SMEs: Getting Disability Right

RoDG conducted five interviews with leaders in top Canadian SME employers. The goal of these conversations was simple: to identify what leaders saw as best practices, to determine where pain points occurred, and to identify information gaps. Much of these conversations focused on issues of disclosure and accommodation. Interestingly, some leading SME employers used best practices for providing accommodations without consciously doing so. Instead, by centering the comfort and productivity of their workforce in general, they incidentally provided accommodations for PWD – without these accommodations being formally requested, and without the necessity of disclosure. Insights from SME interviews are divided into three categories, mirroring the experiences of PWD team members: hiring and onboarding, workplace accommodations, and workplace culture/attitudes. These insights are a combination of observations and identified best practices from top SME employers.

### Hiring and Onboarding

#### Disclosure Rare even for Organizations known to Hire PWD

*“Still atypical to disclose before hiring”*

Interviewees universally expressed that few of their job candidates disclosed a disability before being hired. This was true even in one organization that developed a reputation for hiring large numbers of PWD workers. When PWD workers did disclose, it was most frequently those that needed specific accommodations during the interview process. While disclosure was more likely to occur after hiring, all interviewees expressed that they likely employed more PWD than was “officially” noted, as only those with accommodation plans had disclosed.

#### Separate Application Accommodations from Decision Makers

*“The decision maker of the hiring is kept deliberately left out of [accommodation] requests. Not that I think hiring managers are biased, but I also want potential new hires to have positive experiences, and not first impressions be about accessibility or accommodation.”*

One strategy top employers used to create a more inclusive workforce (including PWD), was to anonymize the hiring process as much as possible, and to ensure the final hiring decision maker was unaware of any accommodation requests. Doing so allowed hiring managers to minimize unconscious bias, and instead select the candidate best suited for the role more consistently.

#### Be Pro-Active in Offering Accommodations in Interviews

*“Started by asking person, right at interview stage (including phone stage). Asked people what they need to make more comfortable or better. So find out a lot then. So things like timing around wheeltrans and whatnot. Great way to feel comfortable right from beginning.”*

Top employers consistently and pro-actively inquired if potential candidates would prefer an accommodation throughout the hiring process. This included direct prompts, going beyond the standard inclusivity templates that are frequently included in job postings. While actually asking for accommodations was rare, this process signalled a commitment to accessibility for potential candidates.

### Workplace Accommodations

#### Think Productivity Adjustments, not Accommodations

*“For us, we’re thinking about performance. If someone is using crummy equipment or getting a sore wrist, or has to squint, or not enough screen and have to flip, or chair uncomfortable… I’d love to say we’re out of the goodness of our heart, but a lot is about performance as well. If we make that small investment initially, its going to pay back in dividends.”*

Across top employers, there was a strong emphasis on providing all employees the tools needed to be at their most productive. This included equipment like high-end ergonomic desk set ups with large monitors. In emphasizing productivity, employers incidentally provided the type of equipment needed by many PWD to also be at their most effective – without them ever disclosing their disability.

#### Start on Day 1

*“Every new employee gets package for accommodation adjustments. First is I do or do not require. I thought it was really important that everyone be asked. There’s all sorts of invisible disabilities, and never wanted staff to have to ask for the form. So you fill out your tax, emergency info, and accommodation form. The approach being, if you want these, I want to deal with it proactively and now, never as performance management plan.”*

One tool to avoid the need for consistent disclosure of disability is to embed the accommodation process into initial onboarding and orientation sessions. This can include providing all employees with forms that must be filled out, thus avoiding having to find or request them later. This also allows for additional adjustments beyond more standard ergonomic assessments and provisions such as more flexible work arrangements. It also avoids the process of assessing whether ones manager is accepting of disability, which is a frequent pain point for PWD employees.

#### Costs Usually Low…. And Pay for Themselves

*“The built environment stuff can be expensive, and I think that’s… the software pieces and equipment parts, those haven’t been too onerous. Might be $1000 in a software purchase. Which is not something we want to spend of course, but necessary for the employee. But they bill out hourly. So if they need stand desk for 6 hours and could otherwise only do 2, going to make that up quick.”* | *“Vast majority were not expensive. 60-70% PWD did not require anything at all”*

Universally, all interviewees described the cost of accommodations as relatively low. Most of these were costless: flexible work arrangements that avoided strict adherence to 8 consecutive working hours. For accommodations with a cost component, the most common were ergonomic equipment such as adjustable desks. The most expensive adjustments involved changes to built environments, but these were one-time changes that could accommodate multiple team members. These changes were also the least frequent, especially with the increased prevalence of working from home.

#### Budget Should be Centralized

*“This is something that’s centralized in HR operational budget. Look at cost over past few years, how many new hires, stats on how old. Older they are the more they’ll need to be accommodated for different pains and whatnot. It’s a different process every year, but have never had to say no. Cut elsewhere”*

One common element across top employers is that accommodation budgets were centralized. This took a key consideration in hiring PWD, or providing accommodations, away from individual managers who may have felt that providing such an accommodation would exceed their operational budget or detract from their profitability (and thus performance bonus). It also better ensured that funds could be re-allocated to provide accommodations when needed. No interviewee reported an instance in which they lacked sufficient budget for accommodations.

#### Benefits can be Unanticipated

*“We’ve had visually impaired lawyers with screen reading software. We found PDFs not well suited to screen reading. So making sure we’re implementing tech that has better recognition of text in virtual document. Bonus if you do this its more searchable using built in search features.”*

Numerous interviewees indicated that by providing needed accommodations, their organizations became more effective or efficient in unanticipated ways. Using documents more accessible for screen readers meant staff could more easily search for text within documents. Moving those in wheelchairs taking customer orders away from takeout windows provided more space for those handling food in takeout areas. Interestingly, organizations who had previously adopted flexible work arrangements or working from home as an accommodation indicated they had a much easier time pivoting to fully remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic: evidence that designing experience with PWD in mind can have embedded situational learnings that are not obvious at the time.

### Workplace Culture and Attitudes

#### Culture Starts at the Top

*“Manager took aside and said couldn’t deal with anymore. Gave a ‘him or me’ ultimatum. […] Top person has to set tone and intent. So I showed all employees then. I’m serious enough to remove a manager who’s not buying in, and supporting the employee withy down syndrome”*

A common thread across organizations with a more inclusive work culture is this culture is set from the top, and failure to adhere to this culture will bring consequences. Numerous interviewees noted that there was initial reluctance by some managers to engage in good faith with PWD employees on their teams. This frequently required leadership to intervene.

#### Sustainable Change Driven by Results

*“After hiring 6-7 [PWD] we saw a pattern: they weren’t taking time off or calling in sick. Worked diligently throughout shift, didn’t cut corners.”* | *“We would feel the impact if we ever lost him in a significant way, he’s that important to us”*

An oft-missing component of accessibility in the workplace is linking this accessibility back to key performance indicators – typically the bottom line. When accommodation or adjustment programs can be linked to increased employee performance or retention, it is far simpler to build momentum and entrench accessible practices throughout an organization. When accessibility is treated as a “nice to have,” it can easily be pushed aside in favour of other priorities.

#### Discussions about Invisible Disabilities more Challenging

*“But the biggest [challenge] is attitudinal. Its not people believe mental health is unimportant, its about knowing how to deal with situations in a personal and empathetic way. Even if you can recognize signs, we are not professionals in mental health space.”*

Almost all interviewees expressed that the most difficult conversations about accessibility concerned those with invisible disabilities, especially those with mental health concerns. These concerns were based on a combination of lack of disclosure, stigma around mental health, and a general lack of information on the subject. Interviewees also indicated this subject often had a significant generational divide.

#### Third Party Expertise Welcome

*“Would be great if all the information could be centralized somewhere, or if there was a phoneline that could direct us to services, government or otherwise.”* | *“There are times I would want expert advice for what is best accommodation”*

One gap interviewees frequently identified was a lack of in-house professional accessibility knowledge. There is a general appetite for third-party experts who can help make decisions and provide information and advice on accessibility and accommodations. There was a preference for more national centres of expertise from those in smaller provinces, as there was a perception that most experts were in larger urban centres.

## Recommendations for SME Leaders

In this section, RoDG provides key recommendations for SME leaders. These recommendations are intentionally kept general to ensure applicability to the greatest number of SME leaders, rather than tailoring recommendations to specific industries.

### Recommendation 1: Assume Non-Disclosure

All SMEs should assume that their employees are unlikely to disclose a disability, even when such disclosure may lead to a needed accommodation. Instead, all decisions should flow from the assumption that PWD prefer not to disclose their disability. Accessibility is not predicated on knowing how many employees identify as having a disability. It is probable that SMEs employing at least 10 individuals currently employ at least one PWD without realizing it.

### Recommendation 2: Separate Accommodations from Hiring Decision

One of the most frequent concerns of PWD applying to jobs is the bias of hiring managers. To avoid this perception, accommodations requests should not be shared with hiring managers, and this practice should clearly be communicated to potential applicants as early in the process as possible. These kinds of substantive commitments tend to be better received by potential PWD job applicants.

### Recommendation 3: Offer Adjustments to all Employees without Disclosure

A key strategy to improve workplace productivity is to offer accommodations/adjustments to all employees during onboarding, ideally without disclosure requirements. This most frequently takes the form of ergonomic assessments and the provision of ergonomic work equipment and can be extended to include inquiries about flexible work arrangements. Crucially, these types of arrangements are a frequently sought benefit, ensuring SMEs can delight PWD team members and attract top talent throughout the market.

### Recommendation 4: Track Changes in Productivity and Retention with Adjustments

To be sustainable, programs such as workplace adjustments must be measured against key performance indicators. By identifying areas in which such initiatives drive a return on investment, they can be expanded throughout an organization, driving comparative advantage.

### Recommendation 5: Centralize Accommodation Budget

In order for workplace adjustment or accommodation programs to be consistent and sustainable, there must be a centralized budget to draw upon. This ensures individual managers are not straining their individual operating budgets, nor factoring this into hiring decisions. Incentive structures must align with providing adjustments. This is difficult with decentralized budgets that may change individual bonus incentives of managers.

### Recommendation 6: Leaders Must Instill Accountability and Reward Success

Organizational change is impossible without leadership setting the standard and holding all team members accountable. This includes sanctioning those who create or maintain barriers in the workplace, while promoting those who are successful in this space. Organizational culture starts at the top, and without leadership action, cannot change.

## Recommendations for Policy Makers

In this section, RoDG provides key recommendations for Policy Makers. These recommendations are intentionally kept general to ensure applicability to the greatest number of SMEs, rather than tailoring recommendations to specific industries.

### Recommendation 1: Provide Centralized Accessibility Information Hub

There is a strong desire amongst SMEs for a centralized set of accessibility resources. This includes information on accommodations, the types of disability one is most likely to encounter in the workplace, and resources on accessibility standards across provinces. This information must be simple and widely disseminated for maximum impact

### Recommendation 2: Offer Financial Incentives for High-Cost Accessibility Initiatives

There is a general perception that accommodations can be expensive in certain areas, most notably built environments. There is an opportunity to use financial incentives to help SMEs with more limited operational budgets make changes to make workplaces more accessible. These incentives should be extended to digital accessibility, checks for which can cost thousands of dollars per month.

### Recommendation 3: Be Role Model for an Accessible Organization

One problem facing many enterprises is a lack of clear role model for accessibility. Federal, provincial, and municipal governments must fill this role. It is difficult especially for smaller enterprises to get disability “right” without clear models and templates to follow.

### Recommendation 4: Collect and Disseminate New Accessibility Research

There is generally little research on disability and accessibility in the Canadian context. Given the increased demand for information with the passing of the *Accessible Canada Act,* there must be increased funding for, and dissemination of, accessibility research to ensure SMEs can best leverage this market for potential employees.

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