

*Committed to improving  
employment for people with  
disabilities in Canada*



**Deep Dive:**

# Embed Disability Awareness into your Onboarding Process



Help new employees understand that a disability inclusive culture is just part of how you do business and ensure that employees with disabilities see steps have been taken to make the onboarding process itself accessible.

## Why is it important?

Get new staff thinking about inclusion from day one, so that your inclusive culture endures even when the organization experiences growth or turnover.

Help new employees understand that a disability inclusive culture is just part of how you do business and ensure that employees with disabilities see steps have been taken to make the onboarding process itself accessible.

## Questions to Ask Yourself

- ▶ Does our usual onboarding process work for an employee with a disability, or would we need to adapt it? How do we communicate our willingness to adapt?
- ▶ When do we explicitly tell new employees that we value people of all abilities and backgrounds?
- ▶ Are we explaining how to request an accommodation?
- ▶ Are training formats accessible, i.e., training location, online platforms, physical or digital documents?

## What to Change

### Before First Day

#### ▶ **Job offers**

If a candidate has requested an accommodation, include this information in the letter of offer. By including their request in the letter of offer, you confirm that you have received their request and you intend to prepare for it as part of their onboarding process.

It's also valuable to include verbiage encouraging employees to share any further adjustments or accommodations they identify as they start working, as they learn what they need to do their best work in this new environment. Including standard wording inviting employees to communicate any accommodation needs in the future leaves the door open if in the future, an employee acquires a disability, has a recurrence of an old condition, or feels more comfortable asking for what they need.

#### ▶ **Communicating with existing staff about a new employee's disability or accommodations**

Have a conversation with your new staff member and decide together what coworkers may need to know about their accommodation or disability, if anything at all. Whenever possible, follow the disabled person's lead about whether they want to share the information themselves, or want their manager to share information on their behalf.

If you are asked to share on behalf of an employee, take notes on what the new employee wants you to convey, and ask yourself

what does the team need to know about this person's disability or accommodation?

For example, a new employee who is autistic may want their coworkers to know they do not often make eye contact, but that this social difference doesn't mean they are not listening intently to what the speaker is saying.

Alternately, if your new staff member has hearing loss, you may need to turn on automatic captions for all Zoom meetings and want to let everyone know in advance of the change. If your new employee is being supported by a job coach or vocational therapist who will visit the workplace, you may want to explain this person's role to their colleagues.

In some cases, there may be nothing that coworkers need to know about the new hire's disability or accommodation needs, and in this case, you should respect the person's privacy and leave any future disclosure to them.

## New Hire Training

### ► Policy and culture training

Onboarding all new employees improves commitment; BambooHR surveyed employees and found that employees who received effective culture training were [12 times more likely to feel committed to their new organization.](#)

It's important that all new hires understand what is expected of them, including what the company stands for and how they are expected to behave. This should include your expectations around contributing to a supportive work environment that is free of harassment, bullying, and discrimination. Depending on where your business operates, there may be legislation or accessibility

standards that specify how you service customers with disabilities and therefore how frontline staff do their job.

### ▶ **Disability Aware Customer Service Training**

While you may not be able to dedicate in-depth training time for disability awareness training for every employee, there are online training programs you can share with managers and supervisors.

Access Forward developed online training to help Ontario retailers who are required to comply with accessibility legislation. Jump to [Module 3: Serving People with Disabilities](#) for their customer service training, which includes great information about the types of disabilities and supports staff may encounter while performing their customer service role.

### ▶ **Job training**

Whether your organization provides workshop style training or one-on-one time with a supervisor, it's a good practice to ask each new hire how they learn best.

Some people benefit from written instructions or job aids with photos that detail the steps in a process as a memory aide. Others learn by doing and will benefit from a demonstration of the task. Ask your new employee what works best for them.

### ▶ **Employee handbook training**

If part of your onboarding includes review of an employee handbook with detailed policies, or your company policy and expectations are shared through your online HR system, you'll need to ensure all new hires can access the information.



If you don't know if your system is accessible, ask your provider. Printed copies or accessible PDFs are possible solutions if the online platform is not accessible.

### ▶ **Benefits paperwork**

If there is paperwork required to enroll in the company benefits plan, ensure the employee can access and complete the information.

If you have an employee who uses assistive technology like a screen reader or alternative keyboard, you will want to confirm the forms are accessible, or offer support in completing paperwork. If you are employing people with cognitive disabilities, check in and ensure they have the support needed to complete forms through their job coach or a family member.

## **New Hire Instructions**

### ▶ **Facility tours**

For some organizations, a facility tour is an integral part of onboarding that covers not only an introduction to the physical workspace, but an orientation to the story of the company's origins and mission. The facility tour might also be the time when you introduce a new employee to their colleagues as you weave through departments and parts of the building. Make sure you know if this tour is accessible to people who use mobility devices like wheelchairs or canes.

If you are aware of access barriers that will require you to modify the tour, make sure you still convey the company information and facilitate the quick introductions that are so important to feeling a sense of belonging.

As you conduct the facility tour for all new employees, consider highlighting the accessibility features of the space as they relate to colleagues and customers. Is there an accessible washroom or breakroom to highlight? Is there an entrance to the building with an automatic door button or ramp?

## What to Say

We sometimes hear that fear of saying the wrong thing prevents nondisabled colleagues or leaders from taking steps to be more inclusive of people with disabilities. Here is some sample language you can adapt for your organization:

Topic	What You Can Say	What You are Conveying
Accommodations	Our workplace welcomes people with disabilities, and we invite new hires to share information about accommodations or adjustments we can make to help them do their best at work.	Restate your commitment to accessibility and accommodations.
Inclusion	Our workplace values diversity of thought and experience, and we are committed to creating an inclusive workplace for all.	Restate your commitment to valuing diversity in experience and thought.
Behavioural Expectations	We do not tolerate bullying, discrimination, or harassment, and will explain the process of reporting these behaviours if you	Set expectations around conduct, and ensure employees understand there is a process for reporting harmful behaviour.

	experience them or witness them.	
Accessible Customer Service	We are committed to complying with legislation and laws in our province regarding accessibility and will make sure you understand the role you play in delivering accessible services.	Recognize your legal duty as a business and ensure employees understand they have a part to play in compliance.
Disability Awareness	We offer opportunities for all employees to receive disability awareness training and your manager will follow up with you.	Promote any opportunities you offer for employees to improve their awareness.

## Disability Awareness Training Programs for Employees

One upside to the COVID pandemic is the proliferation of free online disability awareness training options for employees and employers.

If you'd like to cover the basics of disability awareness with all staff, Hire for Talent has entry level awareness raising information.

The [Disability 101](#) section of the Hire for Talent website includes interactive quizzes that can be shared, or you can download them as PDFs. Hire for Talent has also provided instructions on how to use their [info sheets as microlearning opportunities](#) with your team.

There are many free options for managers who want to gain a deeper understanding of disability inclusion, and many of them are free, to further their own understanding of disability.

The [Creating Accessible Workplaces](#) course was designed by Presidents Group. It's a 5-part on-demand course designed for operational managers, HR managers, and all staff involved in the hiring process. The content includes guidance on accommodations and legal responsibilities, as well as advice on approaching organizational culture.

It is free for BC employers within the Community of Accessible Employers, who can each register up to 10 staff.

[Autism and Neurodiversity in the Workplace](#) is a program designed by the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism (CIRCA). The program includes a series of six self-paced, interactive modules.

It is designed for HR professionals, employers, supervisors, managers, co-workers, autistic employees, and anyone interested in inclusive employment, to learn practical strategies on how to support all employees to be successful on the job.

[The Inclusive Workplace](#) offers free eLearning courses and downloadable resources for businesses, job seekers, employees on the autism spectrum or with an intellectual disability, and employment agencies.

There are some formal eLearning modules and videos and articles you can review without setting up an account.

Employer Assistance and Resource Network is a US based non-profit supporting companies to be more disability inclusive. Their [Strategies for Disability Inclusion](#) courses offer training based on the Inclusion@Work Framework. Each segment lasts 10-15 minutes and includes a quiz to test your knowledge.

## Further Reading

Glassdoor.ca's [Onboarding Checklist](#)

Retail Council of Canada's [Enabling Retail Handbook](#)

Untapped Talent Guide's [Offers and Onboarding New Employees](#)

Worktopia's [Success in the Workplace Toolkit: Strategies from Autistic Employees](#)

