

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



## **Deep Dive:** **Embedding Disability Inclusion in your Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plans**



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## Why is it Important?

Naming disability and accessibility alongside other priority areas in your diversity and inclusion efforts is a key practice [at leading inclusive organizations](#). Not only is it vital from an ethical standpoint, but it can also bolster your unique value proposition.

As with other dimensions of diversity, disability doesn't exist in a vacuum. Instead, disability intersects with many of the diversity dimensions you're likely already addressing.

For example, your Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts likely aim to address the inequities in gender representation at your organization's leadership level. It's wise to note women are [more likely to have disabilities](#) and women with disabilities have unique challenges that are often compounded by other aspects of their identity.

By including disability in DEI efforts, you are signaling that your organization is on track to being truly inclusive and a leader in practices that foster more innovation and financial stability. With [20% of working age adults \(25 and over\) having a disability](#), it's crucial to start building accessibility into your business.

It's also good business. Consider that inclusive companies are 120% more likely to hit financial [targets](#).



## Questions to Ask Yourself

- ▶ Have you been including disability in your DEI frameworks or is it an afterthought? Unfortunately [disability is often the last area](#) of diversity organizations address, with 90% of global corporations stating they are committed to diversity, but only 4% reporting a [disability inclusion focus](#).
- ▶ Do you know how your employees with disabilities feel about their workplace? A [2021 study by Angus Reid Institute and the Rick Hansen Foundation](#) found that 40% of disabled employees say companies fall short when it comes to hiring those who are disabled. At the same time, 78% of those surveyed said disability should be included in DEI efforts.
- ▶ Has your DEI framework been developed in a way that welcomes your employees with disabilities to contribute? How do you need to shift your input processes to ensure they are accessible?
- ▶ Have you assessed your organization's maturity level for DEI overall? How much work is needed to catch up with disability?

## What to change

- ▶ **Avoid comparisons.** The stigma and barriers faced by people with disabilities have some commonalities with other types of discrimination, and yet, many distinct elements.

For example, people with nonapparent disabilities often must weigh the risk of discriminatory treatment when choosing whether to disclose, similar to the experience of many

LGBTQ2S+ community members faced with the question of whether a new team or workplace is a safe place to be out with each promotion or job change.

And yet, there are many unique aspects to disability inclusion, including the digital barriers to access that may prevent disabled candidates from making it through your website's jobs page or your AI-based competency testing. If your organization has limited exposure to disability, reach out to [disability inclusion professionals](#) or [peers with more experience](#).

- ▶ **Consider impact.** In past years, disability simulation exercises gained some traction as empathy-building experiences for people without disabilities. Whether this involved leading blindfolded colleagues through an office building, or senior leaders attempting to navigate an entrance to the facilities in a wheelchair—before you consider a disability simulation at your workplace, take some time to assess the impacts.

If your organization has a well developed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion program, it may be clear to you that such exercises are at best limited, and at worst quite offensive to people who live with accessibility barriers on a daily basis.

- ▶ **Set clear goals.** It's important to set and define benchmarks and metrics, no matter where you are on your DEI arc.

Whether you're in start-up mode or more established, [tracking and measuring clearly identified goals](#) will support you in reaching your goals of including disability in your strategic plan. In short, start where you are and keep going.

Setting yourself up for success ought to include creating easy wins to help gain traction quickly with minimal resistance.

For example, something as low cost as [offering captions on virtual meetings](#) is a relatively simple task with immediate results. Establishing and tracking performance metrics will create momentum and keep your organization on track.

- ▶ **Centre Disabled Experience.** When inviting staff with lived experience of disability to contribute to your DEI resources, bear in mind the emotional labour and vulnerability that comes with participation.

Value personal experience and don't expect or assume free additional labour. Instead, offer to [compensate them fairly](#).

## Align your DEI work with disability inclusion

The work you've already begun on DEI can offer some high level strategies that transfer well to the work of accessibility and disability in your organization. Referring to your strategic plan is a powerful starting point and will help keep you on track to implement practices that will move you closer to diversity maturity.

Ensuring senior leadership is committed, and communicating their resolve, is also vital to creating a culture that prioritizes diversity and inclusion.

Another important aspect: ensuring accessibility is prioritized in budget discussions, and that teams have sufficient resources to implement. Here it is also wise practice to invite input and collaborations from other departments outside of HR.

Identify your goals in accessibility and share them with your teams so they are a part of building best practices.

It's also key to begin building accessibility into your diversity and inclusion frameworks within your strategic plan, if you haven't already. Offering transparency to staff will also foster more consensus and highlight an authentic intention to make inclusivity a priority.

Creating strong marketing and communications plans, and materials that highlight your organization's work towards a truly inclusive culture with access for everyone, is also key. This should include both internal and external plans to include all stakeholders.

It's also important to stay up-to-date on the latest developments in disability awareness, accessibility, and new legislation. In Canada, disabilities are protected under human rights legislation, as well as provincial or federal accessibility legislation. Requirements vary by province and depending on your location and where you do business, there could be upcoming changes to requirements.

Wherever possible, aim to be up to date and informed, further showcasing your drive towards inclusion.



# Gauging your Starting Point

Conducting an employee benefits satisfaction survey can provide the clarity needed to update your health benefits package.

Consider where you're at with overall DEI, and reference the [Deloitte Diversity Equity and Inclusion Maturity Model](#) as a guide.



## What to say

Communicating in a way that is supportive, clear, and aligns with your values is the best way to invite conversation and feedback. Offering anonymous options will give staff the safety to share openly.

Like other areas of your diversity and inclusion efforts, you may find some employees were ready to talk about disability long before the organization was ready, and they may have



frustrations surface. Provide space for the messy work of input and what can be emotionally charged conversations.

Creating surveys and listening sessions to assess what employees are experiencing in the workplace and creating space for them to speak freely about concerns related to work culture, can go a long way towards discovering gaps and strengthening your goals.

## **Valuing your people**

- ▶ Disability is a broad category that encompasses many different types of limitations and experiences of exclusion. Hold space for that diversity of experience and acknowledge there are often overlaps in accessibility. One person's access may be another person's barrier.
- ▶ While it's crucial to consider the emotional labour involved in asking employees with disabilities for their input, it's also important to never assume it's their area of expertise or that they would be interested in contributing solely because of their lived experience.
- ▶ If there is interest in participating, ensure it is compensated fairly outside of their usual salary.
- ▶ Given the prevalence of disability in our society, it's likely that many employees have a partner, family member, or other key relationship to someone with a disability. Such folks are natural allies and potential champions in bringing disability inclusion to life in your DEI efforts.
- ▶ Offer training and workshops for those who express limited knowledge of disability inclusion.





## Further Reading

Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion [Glossary of Terms](#)

Forbes article [Mistakes to Avoid When Including Disability in your DEI Program](#)

HR Research Institute [Research Report and Infographic](#)

Presidents Group [E-Learning course](#)

