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The Integrated Project Report is part of the Disability and the Workplace: Challenges, Trends and Best Practices among SMEs in Canada research study conducted in partnership with the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation as part of the Hire for Talent project delivered by CBDC Restigouche.

Disability and the Workplace: Challenges, trends, and best practices among SMEs in Canada

JULY 2022

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RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following report presents the findings of the "Disability and the Workplace: Challenges, trends, and best practices among SMEs in Canada" research project, which was carried out between January 2022 and June 2022. The objective of the research project was to identify best practices, challenges, and emerging trends on issues related to disability and the workplace in Canada, particularly as related to small and medium sized employers (SMEs). It was led by the CBDC Restigouche in partnership with the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and funded in part by the Government of Canada's Opportunities Fund for People with Disabilities. This research is part of the CBDC Restigouche's *Hire for Talent* initiative, which is a national awareness campaign aimed at increasing employer confidence when hiring people with disabilities.

The most recent Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) found that 22 per cent of the Canadian population 15 years of age and over had at least one disability in 2017, representing approximately 6.2 million individuals. People with disabilities had lower rates of employment compared to those without disabilities – 59 per cent compared to 80 per cent respectively– particularly among Canadians with a severe or very severe disability (Morris et al., 2018).

The CSD also found that people with disabilities who are able to overcome barriers to employment continue to face barriers once they enter the labour force. In 2017, 37 per cent of people with disabilities aged 25 to 64 required at least one workplace accommodation. Of those who required workplace accommodation, 59 per cent had all of their requirements met, 19 per cent had some of their needs met, and 21 per cent had none of their needs met. Of those who had at least one unmet workplace accommodation, 69 per cent said they did not request an accommodation from their employer. One-quarter (25 per cent) of respondents stated that they did make a request of their employer for an accommodation, however, 40 per cent were refused their request (Morris, 2019). These numbers may signal a lack of safe and inclusive workplace cultures where people with disabilities feel that they are able to request adjustments and accommodations, along with a gap between what people with disabilities need and what employers are willing or able to provide.

Although data is still limited, it is clear that people with disabilities face unique challenges and impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, people with disabilities have been more likely to report mental health concerns throughout the pandemic compared to the general population (Saba et al., 2021). Further, internet usage among people with disabilities is lower than that of the average population. Given the growing importance of video conferencing and telework throughout the pandemic, this lower internet usage rate represents a significant barrier for people with disabilities to participating and succeeding in the paid labour force (Saba et al., 2021). Finally, people with disabilities may be more susceptible to the COVID-19 virus and its

health impacts, and thus may become more excluded from the workforce as a means to protect their health (Saba et al., 2021).

As the focus of this project is primarily on SMEs, it is also important to understand the overall context of SMEs in Canada and how SMEs have been impacted by the pandemic, particularly with respect to recruiting and retaining employees from underrepresented or equity-deserving groups, such as people with disabilities. According to the report, *Supporting Entrepreneurship and SMEs: A Post-Pandemic Skills and Training Agenda* (Saba et al., 2021), skills gaps and labour shortages have long been identified as a key challenge for SMEs; however, the pandemic has created new challenges related to recruitment, training, upskilling and inclusive HR practices. For example, smaller organizations have, overall, laid off employees throughout the pandemic at much higher rates than larger ones. Further, certain sectors have been more affected than others. For example, organizations in the hospitality, retail and entertainment sectors were not able to adapt as easily as other sectors that could more readily pivot to remote-work environments. The impacts on smaller businesses, and these sectors in particular, have resulted in disproportionately negative impacts for disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities, as these groups have greater representation in these sectors (Saba et al., 2021).

Recognizing these challenges, this report shares findings from this project related to best practices, challenges, and emerging trends on issues related to disability and the workplace in Canada, particularly as related to SMEs. The key research questions that guided this project included:

- What are the opportunities, needs and challenges of SMEs related to recruiting, hiring, supporting, and retaining people with disabilities?

- What challenges do people with disabilities face in entering and succeeding in the workforce — with a special emphasis on SME business environments?

- What are the challenges experienced by employers and people with disabilities related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as trends and forecasts for adapting to a post-pandemic environment?

- How do challenges faced by people with disabilities interact with or are compounded by other social identities (i.e., class, race, gender) and life conditions (i.e., rurality, economic landscape, parenting)?

The above questions were explored through the following research methods:

- **Literature review** on best practices, challenges, and emerging trends on issues related to disability and the workplace in Canada, with a particular focus on SMEs. Key questions included:

    o What are the policies, programs, and services offered in Canada for bridging gaps experienced by people with disabilities related to succeeding in the workplace?

    o What is the current context of SMEs in Canada?

    o What are the best practices, challenges, and emerging trends related to disability and the workplace?

- **Survey of SMEs** to better understand the employment practices of SMEs related to hiring and retaining people with disabilities and other equity-deserving groups, including the types of support that would be helpful and the challenges that they experience, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey methodology was purposeful in design and as such did not aim to be representative of the Canadian population of SMEs. Survey participants were recruited through the Community Futures Network of Canada. A total of 410 surveys were included in the analysis.

- **Survey of people with lived experience of disability** to better understand the employment situation of people with disabilities, the challenges they may experience working and looking for work, support services they find helpful, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their employment and personal lives. The survey methodology was purposeful in design and as such did not aim to be representative of the Canadian population of people with lived experience of disability. Survey participants were recruited through service provider partners of the CBDC Restigouche. A total of 417 surveys were included in the analysis.

- **Focus groups with SMEs** to explore in greater detail the topics that were included in the surveys, such as the employment practices of SMEs related to hiring and retaining people with disabilities and other equity-deserving groups, including the types of support that would be helpful and the challenges that they experience, particularly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2022, SRDC conducted three focus groups in French and five in English with SMEs, defined as employers with less than 500 employees. Participants were recruited by the CBDC Restigouche and were grouped based on preferred language and region (Atlantic – PEI, NS, NB, NL; Central West – MB, SK; Ontario; Quebec; West – BC, AB). Many participants were SMEs located in rural communities, and there were representatives from all provinces except PEI. No SMEs from the Territories participated. In total, there were 30 focus group participants, and group size ranged from two to seven participants.

This report outlines the key findings of this project. It first discusses findings related to SMEs, including current inclusivity practices, challenges experienced, practices and supports identified as being helpful, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second part of the report then discusses the experiences of people with disabilities, including their overall employment situation, challenges they experience working and looking for work, support services they find helpful, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report then provides a brief conclusion as well as suggestions for future research.

FINDINGS – SMALL- AND MEDIUM-SIZED EMPLOYERS

Overall, SMEs are motivated to be more inclusive, both because of their value system and recruitment needs.

Most representatives[1] from SMEs reported that their organization has either hired or are interested in hiring people with disabilities. For example, approximately half of focus group participants (43%) reported having hired people with disabilities in the past, approximately two-thirds of survey respondents (70%) reported that a person with a disability was working at their organization at the time of the survey, and half of survey respondents (49%) reported that their organization had hired people with disabilities in the last five years. Further, 16 per cent of survey respondents indicated that there have been people with disabilities employed in senior positions within their organization. Finally, most survey respondents (78%) indicated that they were either very or somewhat likely to consider hiring people with disabilities in the future.

According to the focus groups, for some SMEs, the desire to employ people with disabilities was motivated by an equity-based lens, meaning they want to provide opportunities for people who face barriers entering and staying in the paid labour force. For other focus group participants, the desire to employ people with disabilities was due to difficulties that they have encountered with recruiting employees, and they therefore perceive the need to tap into 'new' populations. For other SMEs, their motivation for employing people with disabilities stems from both their value system and recruitment needs.

The reason most often mentioned by survey respondents for why their organization has not hired people with disabilities in the past is that people with disabilities have never applied. For example, one survey respondent stated:

> *"We simply haven't had many applications, but have had great success in employing several people with disabilities over the years."*

Other reasons most mentioned by survey respondents included that the organization hasn't actively tried to recruit people with disabilities, hasn't considered this as an option before, and is not sure how to make workplace roles suitable for people with disabilities.

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[1] The term "participant" or "respondent" in this section refers to representatives of SMEs who participated in the project's focus groups or survey of SMEs.

Most SMEs report that they engage in inclusive employment practices, although only a minority have had the opportunity to adopt formal inclusive workplace policies.

Most SMEs reported that they either have, or would like to have, policies related to an inclusive workplace. Approximately one-third of survey respondents (38%) indicated that their organization had a written inclusive workplace policy. Further, of those respondents who had not indicated that their organization has a written inclusive workplace policy, half (51%) reported that they plan to develop a policy in the future.

However, as understood through the focus groups, SMEs had a diversity of inclusive policies in terms of focus and depth, as well as various perspectives on the need for SMEs to have written policies. Approximately half of focus group participants stated that they do not have any official inclusivity policies, but rather focus on case-by-case planning, stemming from discussions with their employees to create an inclusive work environment. The survey results seemed to corroborate this finding, as regardless of whether or not an organization had a written policy, most respondents (86%) indicated that their organization had implemented concrete measures to support an inclusive workplace.

The majority of focus group participants emphasized that they have practices that they abide by to encourage inclusivity, as opposed to formal policies. For example, one participant emphasized their recruitment approach as a key inclusive practice that they engage in, an approach which has changed over the past few years. They developed a job shadow process so that candidates are able to have a thorough understanding of the job and are able to make an informed decision around if the role is a good fit for them. At the same time, as an employer, they are able to gather feedback from the prospective employee. This focus group participant explained that through this practice, the interview has actually become the least effective part of the recruitment process:

> *"We've shifted in the last year or two [from] old methods of screening people. We've put more emphasis on candidate jobs shadow. [The job candidates shadow] some of our employees, and then we are able to gather feedback from co-workers and clients, and the candidate is able to understand the job better. The interview part has become the least effective part. [We are] trying to redefine all these practices."*

Some of the focus group participants emphasized that employer practices that encourage inclusivity are key, emphasizing open-mindedness and a culture of trust. They highlighted the importance of building trusting relationships that enable the workplace to be considered a safe place, along with having employees feel comfortable talking (but not forcing them to talk) about challenges they are experiencing (both emotional or physical). One participant also specified that they continually watch for the physical and emotional states of their employees. Managers need

to build those relationships in order to have a good knowledge base of what is needed by employees, so that all employees – including people with disabilities – can feel part of the team. One participant also noted that managers need to develop relationship building skills in their employees.

While it is true that having a policy does not always equate to practice, often a policy can be a starting place for building the groundwork for an inclusive organizational culture, vision, and strategic direction. Further, it is not always simply that SMEs choose not to develop written policies, but rather that they lack the resources or knowledge on how to do so, particularly for smaller organizations. For example, the survey results demonstrated that larger organizations were more likely to have written policies compared to smaller organizations.

Due to their limited resources (time and money) compared to larger organizations, smaller SMEs may face difficulties in developing inclusivity policies, and in general, hiring and retaining people with disabilities. These difficulties were both mentioned by focus group participants and partially supported by survey results showing that respondents from larger organizations were generally more likely to have reported hiring people with disabilities in the last five years compared to smaller organizations. At the same time, the enthusiasm and dedication of SMEs for developing support structures, as well as the nature of close-knit teams within SMEs, may enable inclusive team building and open communication, practices which focus group participants highlighted as central to supporting employees with disabilities.

Finally, it should also be noted that survey respondents most often mentioned as their final comment that their organization specifically focuses on hiring the most qualified candidate regardless of their identity, including people who identify as having a disability. These comments were generally made in a positive context, focusing on the fact that these organizations did not discriminate. However, the comments did also highlight that many organizations did not feel it was necessary or even appropriate to favour or target a particular group, including people with disabilities. The following is an example of this type of comment:

> *"I would hire anyone no matter what their background is. People are people to me. If the individual has drive, and willingness to learn I would hire. I would increase pay as business grows due to their skills. If someone creates value to the business, I will create value to them. Can't give something for nothing. Can't work at a loss so someone can get a paycheck."*

There is a perception among SMEs that they do not offer employment opportunities that are appropriate for people with disabilities.

There was a perception among a number of SMEs that the job duties associated with their business are not appropriate for people with disabilities. When survey respondents were asked what is the biggest challenge that their organization faces related to hiring people with

disabilities, they most often mentioned that people with disabilities would not be able to do the job tasks associated with their business or that finding appropriate tasks (i.e., the right fit) would be difficult. The following are a few examples of comments related to this point:

> *"Our workplace is very fast paced, I never thought of how we could include people with disabilities to our workforce."*

> *"Our work requires attention to detail and requires physical strength as well."*

> *"An employee has to be able to be a key holder, work COMPLETELY independently, understand a variety of inventory, accurately weigh and fill bags and follow written instructions."*

> *"My restaurant is a fast-[paced] workplace and the work is often demanding both physically, mentally, and sometimes emotionally. It's hard for me to see the opportunity [to] hire someone with disabilities but I am open. Perhaps it could be someone in a support role?"*

Focus group participants also highlighted these challenges noting the following:

- SMEs may not have people with disabilities apply to work for them because the roles they offer may not be realistic for people with disabilities to work in. Further, people with disabilities may not apply to positions due to fear of rejection or discrimination.

- Many SMEs involve roles where there are not a lot of positions that can be easily and realistically adapted for people with physical disabilities (for example restaurant serving or product production).

- SMEs may have fast-paced work environments, and employees get overwhelmed and burnt-out, so it is difficult to retain them. This may be even further exacerbated for people with disabilities.

What is interesting is that the most common accommodations that were mentioned by respondents from the people with disabilities survey were modified or different job tasks or modified hours, or days or reduced work hours, which perhaps helps to explain the disconnect between organizations wanting to hiring people with disabilities yet not having high rates of success in doing so.

SMEs shared a number of challenges to being more inclusive related to their business and community characteristics.

There is a perception among SMEs that the nature of SMEs themselves (e.g., businesses and organizations with limited staffing levels and resources) leads to limitations when hiring and retaining people with disabilities. The following points were mentioned by focus group participants and survey respondents:

- Adapting roles for people with disabilities can be difficult for SMEs, as they may lack the time, staff resources, and budgets in order to do so, and they are already stretched thin. For example, one survey respondent noted:

    "We don't have a formal process in place because it hasn't been something we have dealt with frequently and it requires significant consideration and time to do so."

- Employees with disabilities may feel singled out or targeted if there is a policy related to their hiring and retaining, particularly if they are the only staff member who the policy directly impacts.

- In a small business, it is easier to make informal adjustments rather than write-up and enact a formal policy.

- Buildings where SMEs are located may not be accessible, and it is expensive for businesses with limited resources to do retrofits.

- For SMEs in rural or remote communities, recruitment and retention issues were further exacerbated by their geographic locations. In such communities, it may be difficult to recruit people in general, and there is a need to create opportunities to attract people to the communities in the first place. Additionally, people may need to travel long distances to reach their workplace and may have limited childcare options, creating a need for flexible work schedules (identified by three focus group participants). And further supported by one survey respondent:

    "We are in an isolated, small community where these opportunities just don't surface."

Both focus group participants and survey respondents also emphasized that they face challenges related to recruiting and supporting people with disabilities. The most common challenges identified by survey respondents included the time and complexities involved in applying for funding for accommodations or wage subsidies, followed by the lack of knowledge or information about hiring or supporting people with disabilities, the difficulties finding qualified

people with disabilities, and the actual cost of accommodating disability in the workplace. However, when survey respondents were asked what is the biggest challenge that their organization faces related to hiring people with disabilities, they most often mentioned challenges finding appropriate tasks, someone qualified for a position or a "right fit", and difficulties finding people with disabilities and that people with disabilities do not apply for positions. Not surprisingly, although SMEs want to learn best practices to support people with disabilities as employees, they often do not know the steps to take to go about doing this. Some focus group participants developed inclusive workplace policies as a first key step in supporting employees with disabilities, while others suggested that having a policy does not necessarily equate to an inclusive workplace or inclusive practices.

SMEs emphasize the importance of a strengths-based focus on employees' abilities as a key success factor in recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce.

Open and honest conversations between employers and employees with a strengths-based focus on employees' abilities (focused on what they can do as opposed to what they cannot do) was a key enabling practice that emerged amongst focus group participants who had experience hiring people with disabilities. A number of focus group participants stated that having open and honest conversations from the start, but also on an ongoing basis, with the employee about their role and abilities is a key practice that they undertake, including needed role adjustments. One focus group participant stated:

> *"Be honest about what is required and expected, how can we do that together, what can you do, what are your limitations. At the end of the day, [the] job has to get done. I have to know what your limitations are and [for you] to be honest about what your limitations are. Day by day, week by week basis, make yourself available to have those conversations."*

It was also emphasized that employees also need to be upfront about their abilities when applying for a role.

Open communication between employers and employees was also emphasized throughout the focus groups by participants. However, in order for this type of communication to occur, prospective employees and current employees need to trust that if they are open about their needs, they will not be penalized or discriminated against by employers. Put another way, there is still a power dynamic between employees and employers, even when employers prioritize open and honest communication. One way to negotiate this power dynamic is to access third party agency services that can assist with supporting the employee and employer in a variety of ways, in which the majority of participants were interested. However, SMEs often do not know where to look for services or feel overwhelmed by the amount of information that is available.

Further, at times focus group participants used "othering-type" language that created a false binary between people with disabilities and people without disabilities (i.e., 'us' and 'them'). There were also examples of this type of sentiment from survey respondents, such as the following comment:

> *"We have not hired people with disabilities yet, however we are not opposed. We are a labour-intensive business however and my concern would be if that a person with disabilities would work independently and keep up with performance expectations."*

However, key to an equity-based approach is having differing practices and accommodations based on people's needs (i.e., recognizing that different people have different needs, due to the varying barriers that they face). This tension signals the challenge of accommodating people's diverse needs while not solidifying socially constructed binaries focused on people's abilities and productivity levels (though in reality, productivity and ability always exist on a spectrum). Central to an inclusive approach to hiring and retention is a strengths-based focus on employees' abilities and skills, and one that prioritizes listening to people with disabilities on what their needs are, while also not solely placing the onus on people with disabilities to bring their needs forward (i.e., employers should ask employees what their needs are at the outset of their employment, and on an ongoing basis).

Some of the key helpful practices mentioned by focus group participants and survey respondents included:

- Practices related to ensuring that their organization is committed to hiring people with disabilities.

  - Learning from other organizations about inclusive workplace policies and practices.

  - Partnering with service providers, and in particular, those that provide employment placements for people with disabilities.

- Practices related to preparing an organization to hire people with disabilities.

  - Identifying employment opportunities that would be appropriate for people with diverse abilities.

  - Relying on medical guidance to understand what people with disabilities are confronted with and to make choices on what to accommodate.

- Practices related to recruiting people with disabilities.

    o Promoting open discussions between employee and employer to determine necessary work adjustments.

    o Exploring paid internships, co-ops, casual and customized positions for people with disabilities.

    o Having a trial period to sort out if it is a good fit for both the employer and employee, and to discern what role and physical adjustments are needed.

    o Relying on medical guidance to understand what people with disabilities are confronted with and to make choices on what to accommodate.

- Practices related to supporting or retaining people with disabilities.

    o Making sure employees with disabilities know who to go to in order to get any required internal support or resources.

    o Being open to accommodations, for example, accommodating flexible work times or working remotely.

    o Ensuring identified adjustments or accommodations are in place.

    o Developing emergency preparedness measures for supporting people with disabilities.

    o Have an external support person who comes with the employee, which helps to create a safety net for the new employee.

    o Funding for wage subsidies while employee is being trained.

Many SMEs lack the knowledge on how to hire people with disabilities and are not aware of available supports. They are also interested in accessing a variety of supports and services through a single access point.

Half of survey respondents (46%) indicated that they were not aware of any resources shown in the survey that aim to support organizations in hiring people with disabilities. The resources that respondents were most aware of are services that help people with disabilities adapt to the workplace as well as grants. Further, one of the main challenges identified by survey respondents is that they lack knowledge and information about hiring or supporting people with disabilities.

Some of the focus group participants also shared that they do not know what local services are available to them to support recruiting, hiring, and retaining people with disabilities, and that it feels like a monumental task to find out that information due to a lack of time to wade through all of the information that exists. Two participants reflected on how disability service providers that they know about are always full and do not have room for new employers in their programs. One participant gave an example of how they were supposed to receive help from a service provider, but that no one from the agency showed up when it was arranged.

Respondents were also asked to indicate their interest in learning more about different topics related to hiring people with disabilities. Both survey respondents and focus group participants were interested in a variety of services, such as legal issues related to hiring people with disabilities, creating inclusive workplaces, and the benefits of hiring people with disabilities from a business perspective. However, both survey respondents and focus group participants emphasized that they are most interested in learning about service providers in their community, and particularly related to matching candidates to jobs and offering advice on accommodations. Focus group participants also emphasized that they want services to help them with local recruitment. Some employers commented that while there seem to be a lot of services once people are hired, there is a dearth of recruitment-type services for SMEs in their communities. Support for new employees, such as establishing routines, which are particularly key for people with cognitive disabilities, was also identified as an important service.

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate which type of assistance would be most helpful for their organization regarding recruiting and retaining people with disabilities. The two most often mentioned forms of assistance included wage subsidies and financial support for workplace adjustments and accommodations. Financial support was also mentioned by focus group participants. Interestingly, one of the most common challenges identified by survey respondents was the time and complexities involved in applying for funding for accommodations or wage subsidies and the actual cost of accommodating disability in the workplace. A few focus group participants also mentioned financial support to fund environmental accommodations would be helpful for SMEs, such as installing wheelchair ramps.

The information source most often mentioned by survey respondents as being helpful for learning about hiring people with disabilities was a single website with advice and answers to questions about inclusive employment policies and practices. Additionally, a single access point for resources was a common suggestion from focus group participants. Often SMEs have to access services from various service providers and seeking them out individually can be time consuming for employers who are already stretched thin and have limited time. Both focus group participants and survey respondents noted that a single access point would help to simplify the process for them and make the information more readily available.

Other information sources mentioned as being helpful by survey respondents included the opportunity to learn from other organizations, online training modules, printed or online manuals/resource guides, and live webinars and discussions. Social media campaigns and an e-newsletter were the sources that were identified the least often by respondents.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on SMEs' ability to hire and retain employees due to business uncertainty and challenges finding skilled employees.

One-third of survey respondents (36%) stated that their organization had laid off employees due to COVID-19 and almost half of respondents (45%) indicated that their organization will experience a workforce shortage in the next five years. Further, almost three-quarters of respondents (74%) indicated that it is difficult to recruit employees whose skills are essential to their organization's mission and development. The areas of the pandemic that had the greatest impact on employees, as perceived by survey respondents, were adapting to remote work arrangements, job performance, physical health, and adapting to on-site work arrangements.

In terms of what organizations have learned over the pandemic about inclusive hiring, survey respondents most often mentioned challenges related to finding workers generally, not just people with disabilities. Other areas mentioned by survey respondents included being flexible with staff and work arrangements, implementing inclusivity practices in general, and the need for working with employees with compassion, appreciation, patience, and in a positive work environment. One survey respondent noted:

> *"I found there were more people willing to apply and work for us that had diverse backgrounds. Along with that, they more often came into interviews with more pertinent skills suited for the job."*

Finally, most survey respondents indicated that their organization would be interested in recruiting from equity-deserving groups in order to meet hiring needs.

Respondents were also asked if they observed different types and/or degrees of impact of COVID-19 on employees who identify as belonging to equity-deserving group. Of those who observed different type/or degree of impact on employees identifying as belonging to equity-deserving groups, over two-third reported that women experienced different and/or degrees of impact of COVID-19, while one-quarter mentioned people with disabilities. Respondents were also asked to provide specific examples of how equity-deserving groups were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Child-care and familial obligations were two of the top three challenges mentioned by respondents, likely associated with the experiences of women-identifying employees. Mental health was the second most often mentioned example of how equity-deserving groups were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Other areas mentioned by respondents included coping with COVID-19 restrictions, reduced hours/opportunities, and isolation.

Both survey respondents and focus group participants noted that the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) made it harder to hire employees overall as it was easier for people to stay home as opposed to seeking out work. However, some focus group participants did recognize that people who were receiving the CERB were not eligible to earn other sources of income. Therefore, people who were interested in seeking out work were not able to, which had a particular effect on small businesses who were looking to recruit and hire. As one participant stated:

> *"[Pandemic] government supports were there for the right reasons, but were working against small businesses."*

SMEs have also had to deal with a lot of uncertainty over the past two years, which has impacted their recruitment and hiring. Two focus group participants reflected on how their businesses had to close at the start of the pandemic, and they had to lay off their staff. These businesses are still recouping their losses and have not been able to hire any new employees in the last two years. The ongoing pandemic has also made it difficult for SMEs to plan ahead, as the situation is always changing, and it is difficult to project what the situation will be six months from now.

The pandemic has also caused issues with employee retention. Focus group participants noted that employees with health conditions, elderly employees, or employees who have family members who are immunocompromised and/or elderly may be hesitant to work outside of the home due to fear and discomfort of being around other people. Additionally, approximately four participants noted the toll that the pandemic has had on employees with mental health conditions, the stress of which has exacerbated their struggles. One participant also noted that for one of their employees who has a hearing disability, masks have made lip reading, a key practice that helps them communicate with customers, difficult.

Some focus group participants, however, mentioned opportunities emerging from the pandemic. Participants shared that the shift to remote work may have made some work more accessible to people with disabilities, in that they have been able to have their work set-ups in their homes in the way that works best for them. Remote work may have also led to greater work-life balance, through its built-in flexibility. However, one participant was mindful that the move to virtual with the pandemic may disadvantage some employees who do not have access to the Internet. Another participant noted that the shift to virtual has opened up remote work opportunities for employees across various industries, which may impact rural and remote SME's ability to recruit and retain local employees for in-person roles.

Two SMEs also noted that they started their businesses during the pandemic, and that this may have given them an advantage, as they built their businesses with adaptations to the pandemic environment. This may have given them an edge over businesses that needed to adapt previous practices to the pandemic environment.

FINDINGS – PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly exacerbated the financial and employment hardships experienced by people with disabilities.

Most survey respondents[2] reported low income, precarious employment, and lack of connection to the labour market. Of the survey respondents who reported an income, most reported earning less than $29,000 in the past year. Further, ten per cent of survey respondents reported no personal income at all. Approximately half of survey respondents (45%) reported that they are not currently working and seven per cent have never worked at all.

Among survey respondents who are working or have worked in the past, their employment has been precarious. Survey respondents who reported that they are currently working, work on average 23 hours per week. Further, approximately two-thirds of survey respondents reported working part-time (58%) and one-third of survey respondents stated that their job is not permanent (33%). Survey respondents with cognitive disabilities were much less likely to work full-time, with only one-third having reported that they have a full-time job compared to two-thirds of survey respondents with solely physical disabilities.

The survey also indicated that many people with disabilities do not have strong attachment to the labour force, particularly among equity-deserving populations, and this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Half of survey respondents (53%) reported being in their job for less than a year, demonstrating the non-permanence of their employment. Further, two-thirds of employed respondents (63%) reported having at least one period of unemployment in the last five years, and respondents overall reported being unemployed for an average of 25 months.

Survey respondents also experienced significant challenges advancing in their jobs. Approximately three-quarters of survey respondents (72%) reported that it was either difficult or very difficult to advance in their jobs. Further, approximately half of survey respondents stated that their disability affects the amount of work (48%) or the kind of work (53%) they can do. Despite the challenges noted above, most survey respondents with employment history (71%) reported being either very satisfied or satisfied with their job. However, not surprisingly, survey respondents who are currently working were more likely to have reported being very satisfied than respondents who are not currently working but worked in the past.

Half of respondents also reported that their employment situations were greatly impacted by COVID-19 and in a number of different ways. Of these, approximately one-fifth reported being

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[2]   The findings from this section are from the survey of people with disabilities. Thus, the term "respondent" refers to people with disabilities.

either laid off due to COVID-19 or had their hours reduced, and one-tenth reported stopping working during the pandemic. For example, one survey respondent stated:

> *"I got hired at a company in the early stages of the pandemic and a few days after I was hired the company was shut down due to COVID-19 so I didn't get the chance to start working at that job."*

The challenges most likely experienced by respondents throughout COVID-19 included challenges related to mental health, isolation from social or family connections, and personal finances. As explained by one survey respondent:

> *"Indeed, when the pandemic occurred my mental health got worse and I lacked motivation to look for work and then when the time came to search for employment there were all these restrictions and then my mental health got worse again. It was very discouraging to search and feel that I could get employed based on having a mental/physical health concerns."*

Other challenges mentioned by survey respondents included access to in-person services, fear of being in public, and physical health. Further, respondents who identified as a gender other than female or male were more likely than women or men to have reported that they experienced challenges related to COVID-19. This is also similar for respondents who identified as LGBTQ2S+ compared to respondents who had not identified as LGBTQ2S+.

However, it is important to note that when asked to provide examples of the impact of COVID-19 on their lives, one-quarter of respondents mentioned positive outcomes such as self-development, more work, and strengthened social connections. Respondents also provided negative examples such as isolation, impact on social life, mental health, anxiety, and difficulties looking for work and accessing jobs.

Finally, respondents reported that there have been a number of services that they normally access that were impacted by COVID-19. The services that were mentioned most often included challenges getting medical appointments, diagnostics and medication, in-person medical appointments, and employment services.

While employers are generally aware of their employees' disabilities and people with disabilities generally request the accommodations that they need, members of equity-deserving groups are less likely to request and/or receive needed accommodations.

Most survey respondents (84%) stated that their employer is aware of their disability. However, visible minorities are slightly less likely than those who identified as white and Indigenous to have stated that their employer is aware of their disability. The most common accommodations required and available to respondents were modified or different job tasks and responsibilities

and modified hours or days or reduced work hours. Half of respondents (45%) stated that they require some form of accommodation and most respondents (79%) reported that they have asked for accommodations from their employers. However, respondents who identified as white reported asking for accommodations more often than respondents who identified as Indigenous and visible minorities.

The main reasons reported by survey respondents for not discussing accommodations with an employer were related to discomfort in raising these issues with employers, including discomfort talking to an employer, lack of perceived openness of the employer, the employer lacking awareness/understanding, and not wanting to cause difficulty. This discomfort may be the reason why equity-deserving groups are less likely to request for accommodations. The main reason respondents stated that they did not receive accommodations was that their employer or supervisor refused their request, that the employer was unaware of the required accommodations, it was not possible due to the type of work, and the accommodation was too expensive.

There are a variety of challenges that people with disabilities face related to employment, with equity-deserving groups facing more challenges and being more likely to find supports helpful.

Approximately two-thirds (62%) of survey respondents reported facing a number of different job-related challenges, whereas most survey respondents reported facing challenges finding work. The job-related challenges most reported by respondents included not knowing what services are available outside their workplace, inflexibility to accommodate due to nature of job, and lack of job security/permanency.

In terms of challenges experienced while looking for work, respondents were most likely to have mentioned challenges related to finding jobs that fit their qualifications, finding jobs that align with their interests, finding jobs that offer adequate flexibility/accommodation, and finding employers with experience hiring people with disabilities. However, when specifically asked what challenges their disability plays related to finding work, most respondents mentioned anxiety, depression and/or mental health. For example, one survey respondent stated:

> *"Because of my anxiety, I would often be afraid to apply to employers because I don't know how they are going to end up treating me based on my disability."*

Employer supports that were mentioned to be most helpful were areas related to communications such as regular check-ins/feedback from their supervisor, inclusive workplace policies, practices, and training resources, and discussions about workplace accommodations with employer. In terms of service provider supports that respondents indicated would be helpful, the most common supports selected by respondents involved assistance with

accommodations as well as assistance with the job transition through check-ins and mentoring or coaching.

People with disabilities who identified as belonging to other equity-deserving groups were more likely to have reported that they face challenges and that supports would be helpful. Respondents with genders other than female or male, as well as women, are more likely than men to have reported employment challenges. Similarly, respondents who identified as LGBTQ2S+ are more likely than respondents who did not identify as LGBTQ2S+ to have reported experiencing employment challenges. Visible minorities are also more likely than people who identify as white and Indigenous to have reported employment-related challenges. Further, respondents who identified as a gender other than female or male, as well as women, were more likely than men to have stated that they experience challenges finding work.

Equity-deserving groups were also more likely to have reported that supports would be helpful. Respondents who identified as a gender other than male or female are more likely than men or women to have stated that employer supports would be helpful.

People with disabilities spoke to the value of unpaid work; however, the availability of unpaid opportunities has been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One-quarter of respondents (27%) reported doing unpaid work at the time of the survey, and they indicated that they primarily do this work to help other people, gain new skills, and to contribute to their community or a cause. Further, the main benefits that they reported receiving from their unpaid work included a sense of purpose, the opportunity to help other people, the ability to gain new skills, and meeting new friends and colleagues.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, had a very significant impact on half the respondents' unpaid work activities. Of these, two-thirds (65%) reported that their volunteer work was either postponed, cancelled, or hours reduced. However, one-tenth reported a positive aspect of the pandemic, for example, that their volunteer responsibilities/hours actually increased.

Mental health and fatigue are key life factors that impact the employment of people with disabilities, with equity-deserving groups being more likely to report that they face challenges.

A number of life factors were reported by respondents as impacting their work and ability to find work, including most importantly mental health and fatigue/energy levels. Physical health was also reported to be important, followed by lack of transportation, and parenting or family care responsibilities.

Respondents who identified as a gender other than male or female were more likely than women or men to have reported that there were aspects of their lives that impact their job. This was

similar for respondents who identified as LGBTQ2S+ compared to respondents who did not identify as LGBTQ2S+. Further, respondents who identified as a gender other than female or male, as well as women, were more likely than men to have stated that they experience life challenges related to finding work.

CONCLUSION AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The above research findings demonstrate that there are many challenges as well as opportunities related to SMEs hiring and retaining people with disabilities. SMEs are interested in hiring people with disabilities, but don't always have the resources or knowledge on inclusive hiring practices. SMEs need and want more concrete, centralized, and community-based support, but do not always know where to access services. At the same time, people with disabilities have been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and are looking for employers that can empathize with the stress and anxiety that they experience related to their disability, as well as complications related to the pandemic. Strengthened opportunities for open and honest communications between employers and potential/current employees with disabilities would allow both parties to have greater success in negotiating a positive, long lasting working relationship.

The following highlights some topics for further research that were identified through this project.

- SMEs are interested in receiving support to hire and retain people with disabilities but find it challenging to access the supports they need. They expressed a strong desire to access services in their communities and receive services through a single access point. An area for future research would be to focus on how to make the access of services less confusing for SMEs, as well as highlight where services can be coordinated to offer more integrated support.

- Factors related to rural communities create unique challenges for SMEs in terms of hiring and retaining people with disabilities, as well accessing support services. It is important to better understand what rural organizations need in terms of support, what types of supports are available in local communities, and how SMEs can leverage existing supports in their communities as well as in larger centers.

- Although most SMEs report that they engage in inclusive employment practices, only a minority have had the opportunity to adopt written inclusive workplace policies. Smaller organizations, in particular, often do not have the resources or knowledge to develop written policies. Further research is needed to understand the relationship between written policies and practices among SMEs, as well as what support small organizations need for developing written policies.

- Flexible work schedules, duties and work environments are critical for enabling people with disabilities to succeed in the workforce. SMEs face challenges in understanding how their job activities can align with the needs of people with disabilities, while people with disabilities emphasize the importance of flexibility for their effective employment. Further research is

needed to better understand how flexible work schedules, duties, and work environments, including options related to working from home, can be leveraged to the benefit of both organizations and people with disabilities.

- Open and honest conversations between employers and employees with a strengths-based focus on employees' abilities is seen as critical for building trusting relationships that enable the workplace to be considered a safe place. This includes having open and honest conversations with the employee about their role and abilities from the start and on an ongoing basis. Further research is needed to fully understand the key components of this approach, as well as how to support employers to integrate a strengths-based focus into their practices and policies.

- Understanding the impact of intersectionality is key for developing a deeper understanding of the experiences of people with disabilities. Social identities play an important role in the extent and type of challenges that people with disabilities face related to employment, as well as the extent and type of services that they need. Further research is needed to better understand the interconnection between different social identities and how employers can support employees in this context.

- Mental health, such as anxiety, stress, isolation, and depression, is a major challenge for people with disabilities that greatly impacts their ability to find and maintain employment, and this has been greatly exacerbated throughout the pandemic. As this is such a critical issue, further research is necessary to better understand what supports people with disabilities require related to mental health in the workplace, as well as how service providers can best support employers in this area.

- It is clear that the pandemic has had an immense impact on people with disabilities, and that, women, visible minorities, LGBTQ2S+, and Indigenous peoples have faced particular challenges. What is less clear is how employers can best support people with disabilities through these challenging times. Further research is necessary to better understand how employers can develop trusting relationships with equity-deserving groups so that both the employee and employer can better understand each others' needs.

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