

# How and Why Disability Inclusion is Driving the Future of Work

*First in a two-part series*

**By Dean Askin and Jeannette Campbell**

To borrow from the famous Bob Dylan song, "The times they are changing." In 2022, that change is, disability inclusion is driving the future of work more than ever before.

Like "disability," "work" is a broad term. Both of these things are diverse. Which makes how and why disability inclusion is driving the future of work a diverse, broad topic.

There is, for example, the angle of how disability inclusion can make a business an employer of choice now and in the future. One can dedicate an entire post to this aspect alone. The same goes for technology and how businesses need to make sure the technology they're using is accessible, so all employees can succeed in their work.

When it comes to the future of work, what we're talking about here — more specifically — is how and why disability is changing the nature of the *workforce*; and hence the nature of work. And why you need to embrace this change.

## Positive changes happening in business

Things are happening like never before in the business world. According to the findings of [The Valuable Truth Report 2022](#) by [The Valuable 500](#), 70% of businesses surveyed are "actively investing in services and supports" for employees who have a disability.

The report noted that although the COVID-19 pandemic "slowed, halted or stalled major gains in employment and culture improvements," it hasn't "dampened intention, commitment or enthusiasm" about disability inclusion efforts and actions by businesses surveyed globally.

An inclusive culture has to be driven by top management, and that's happening more. The [2022 Disability Equality Index \(DEI\) report](#) found, 30% of survey respondent companies have a senior executive who has a disclosed disability. That's up 20% over 2021.

Other DEI findings:

- 6% of businesses also have a board of directors member who has a disability
- 74% do business with disability-owned businesses

- 66% use data to track their disability-inclusive hiring progress
- 61% make candidates aware that accommodations are available for job interviews
- 70% “authentically” market their products or services “directly to the disability community”

## Other major reasons why disability inclusion is a driver

But there are also other noteworthy reasons why it’s going to be even more of a driving force in the years ahead. They include these five major factors:

- **The number of people who have a disability is increasing.**

Right now about 6.2 million Canadians (22%) have a disability. That’s expected to rise to 25% by 2025. It’s important to remember that “disability” is a broad term; disability is diverse.

Conference Board of Canada research found, the number of Canadians who have a *physical disability alone*, is expected to increase 1.8% each year, reaching 3.6 million by 2030.

This all means that over the next few years, you’re likely to have more job applicants, employees or colleagues working with a disability — disclosed or not.

- **There’s a labour shortage across business and industry sectors, and people who have a disability are a vital talent solution.**

Businesses need to expand their talent searches to include the disability talent pool. By doing so, they have a larger reservoir of skilled, qualified candidates for roles that need to be filled.

A 2019 TD Economics study pulled no punches. The authors of [Canadians with Disabilities: Seizing the Opportunity](#) made it clear, businesses that don’t access this talent and hire inclusively won’t be competitive in their markets, in the years ahead.

More disability-inclusive hiring has major economic advantages, report co-author Derek Burleton, Vice-President and Deputy Chief Economist at TD Bank, said in a 2020 *You Can’t Spell Inclusion Without a D* [podcast episode](#).

“You think about higher incomes, that can in turn lead to more tax revenue, reinvested in public infrastructure and the like, there can be enormous knock-off effects from it.”

There's the potential to cut the employment gap in half, creating around 440,000 jobs over the next 10 years, the *Canadians with Disabilities: Seizing the Opportunity* report noted.

That would be a \$C53-billion increase in gross domestic product (GDP), according to the report. Another scenario: The employment gap closed by one-third, the GDP increase by \$C36 billion and 292,000 more Canadians who have a disability, employed.

- **Study after study points out, the businesses that are going to be successful in the future are the ones that are diverse and inclusive, reflecting the communities they serve.**

"The real value here is in the contribution that someone with a disability brings to your organization, the diversity of thought, the diversity of approach, the diversity of lived experience," Paul M. Clark, Executive Vice-President of TD Bank Group, said in the same 2020 podcast episode.

Clark noted, the biggest challenge "inside most organizations today" when it comes to disability-inclusive hiring, is figuring out how to "reframe" and focus on business advantages instead of accommodation.

Business leaders seem to be heeding the message that their companies need to be inclusive for both employees and the communities they serve: Business surveyed for *The Valuable Truth Report 2022* said "customer-focused improvements" on disability inclusion is the "second largest pool of disability inclusion goals," following close behind the number-one "focus on actions related to culture."

- **Public opinion is shifting. Polls show that people are expecting disability inclusion by businesses. And businesses need to pay attention to their publics.**

For decades, disability inclusion wasn't thought about a whole lot. But now, there are expectations of businesses and brands when it comes to disability inclusion, according to recent Angus Reid polls.

In one, 78% of Canadians who responded said disability should be part of workplace diversity, equity and inclusion policies.

Then there's the consumer aspect: An Angus Reid/Rick Hansen Foundation survey published in November 2021 found, 62% of Canadians would be more likely to do business with a company if they knew the business had specific policies supporting employees who have a disability.

Overseas in the U.K., a 2019 study found that British retailers are losing 17 million pounds (C\$26.5 million) each year in sales. That's because they aren't meeting the online shopping needs of customers who have a disability.

- **There's a huge global disability consumer market.**

Businesses that embrace disability inclusion at all levels of the organization, across all roles and operations, will be more successful and competitive. That's because they'll be able to expand their markets, reaching millions more consumers and clients with their products and services. More potential sales. More potential profitability. Disability inclusion is a powerful incentive and driver for any business in this regard.

In its 2020 annual report, [\*The Global Economics of Disability\*](#), the Return on Disability Group puts the total disability market at 5.28 billion people (1.8 billion who have a disability, plus 3.4 billion family and friends). They control about US\$13 trillion in disposable income.

Disability is right now reshaping how businesses market their products and services — 69% of companies surveyed are now featuring people who have a disability in their communication and marketing campaigns.

**Get the big picture on disability inclusion**

If you're approaching disability inclusion only from the *duty to accommodate* lens, you're not getting the big picture of how and why disability inclusion is reshaping work and driving the future of your business.

Here's a significant element in that bigger picture: In one U.S. employer [survey by the Job Accommodation Network](#), 90% of businesses polled said providing an accommodation helped them retain a valued employee.

It's part of a culture shift — don't look at accommodations as an exception to standard practices, policies and procedures in your organization. In the wake of the pandemic, *modification* is perhaps a better term than *accommodation*. Because over the past two years, companies learned how to modify workplaces and ways of working for *all* employees.

This is what an April 2021 report about employment opportunities in the Alberta tech sector for people in that province who have a disability found: When you “tackle accommodations from the perspective of long-term organizational change and culture shift,” you'll be “more likely to create an environment where all employees” feel welcome, safe and supported.

## **Embrace it — strategically for success**

In North America it wasn't so long ago that there was a lot of resistance to disability inclusion in business and employment — largely because of attitudes towards and perceptions of disability. It was never given a thought in strategic business planning.

And this is still the case in many countries around the world.

In the U.S. and Canada, there's been a lot of progress. Today, more than ever, savvy business leaders understand — or are beginning to understand — that when their business goals and disability inclusion are closely aligned, *that* inclusion can drive the nature of work and future business success.

As the February 2022 Public Policy Forum report, [Employers' Lessons Learned in Hiring, Retaining and Advancing Employees with Disabilities](#) noted, embracing disability inclusion to stay competitive “requires conscientious choices” by businesses.

Gain [a better understanding](#) of how and why disability inclusion is driving the nature of work now and in the future. Make deliberate decisions. Take [proactive action](#) to fully embrace disability inclusion. By doing all these things, you'll be well positioned to steer a successful course as disability inclusion drives the future of work, and your business.

In part two of this series, we'll look at making sure disability is part of the DEI conversation in your business.

**Dean Askin** is the Communications Strategist for the Ontario Disability Employment Network. **Jeannette Campbell** is CEO of the Ontario Disability Employment Network.