

Inclusive Municipalities as Businesses: A Case Study Showcasing the City of Ottawa

Introduction

ODEN identifies and evaluates promising practices in the business sector and translates that knowledge to make it accessible to other businesses looking to start, or advance, their inclusive hiring journey. There is a strong case for disability inclusion in the workplace. Being disability inclusive makes a business six times more likely to be innovative, agile and capable of responding quickly to opportunities and change¹. Case studies of **disability-inclusive businesses** provide a great opportunity for knowledge exchange among the business community so that others can adopt lessons learned on how to build a more inclusive workforce and benefit from this diversity.

To create consistency and objectivity when selecting a business for a case study, ODEN has identified metrics that are measurable and for which evidence can be provided to support the selection of this business. These metrics are classified under three categories:

1. **Accessibility.** This category refers to the business commitment to build accessibility in their workplace practices and customer services. This can include displaying inclusion and diversity policies; messaging in their marketing material that promotes accessibility and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); marketing and public facing documentation that demonstrates representation from people who have a disability; and having materials and communication in accessible formats.
2. **HR Processes and Procedures.** This category refers to the Human Resources processes and procedures and how disability inclusion is embedded at every step of the employment cycle — from attracting talent, to recruitment, to the interview process, onboarding and retention, and connecting to the talent pipelines.
3. **Corporate and Leadership Commitment.** This category refers to measuring corporate and leadership competencies around DEI; building employee awareness in relation to the organization's DEI vision/mission; whether evidence can be found of strong communication from leadership/management regarding accountability for implementing DEI strategies; implementation of coaching /mentoring to drive DEI strategy; and whether DEI training is implemented across the organization.

Using these three categories as guidelines the [City of Ottawa](#) has been selected as a disability-inclusive business for this case study. It is important to note that ODEN learned much about the disability inclusion work that the City has done as a result of collaborations; the City has worked with Performance Plus Rehabilitative Care Inc. (PPRC). PPRC is a member of the ODEN network and part of the case-study collection under High Performing Employment Service Providers.

¹ Understanding Disability Inclusion Connections: Breaking Down Barriers and Building Bridges. Dean Askin. October 5, 2023. <https://www.odennetwork.com/understanding-disability-inclusion-connections-breaking-down-barriers-and-building-bridges/>

Disability Inclusion at the City of Ottawa — an Early Start to an Inclusive Journey

With over 17,000 workers across 10 departments, the City of Ottawa is one of the largest employers among municipalities in Ontario². And according to the **City for All Women Initiative**, in their 2017 report named *People Living With Disabilities, Equity and Inclusion Lens Snapshot*, in the City of Ottawa there were “161,445 people living with disabilities, comprising 13.2 percent of Ottawa’s population.”³

Well before the Accessibility of Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) became law (2005), the Council for the City of Ottawa adopted the **Equity and Diversity Policy** in 2002. This was built as a policy that, according to the **City for All Women** initiative, “recognized women, racialized citizens, people with disabilities, LGBTQ and Aboriginal People as groups designated for measures intended to promote equity”⁴.

In 2006, the Accessibility Advisory Committee approved a motion that “the City of Ottawa apply an **Accessibility Lens** to all of its work — reports, motions, policies, procedures and decisions. All submissions to council would thereby include a statement or description of the impact on all persons ensuring that any accessibility and inclusion issues or potential barriers have been identified and precluded.”⁵

By reading these reports and other public documentation, it is clear that beyond legislative requirements, the City of Ottawa has been committed to providing equal opportunities and accessibility for people who have a disability for *a very long time*.

Reading the **Policy Statement on Duty to Accommodate** for the City of Ottawa offers insight into the importance provided to employees who have a disability. The policy describes accommodating people who have a disability *first*. Accommodations in the workplace for parental and religious observance, as other identities that can require an accommodation, are also named in the document. Naming disability **first** is not taken lightly — often disability is one aspect or identity missing when businesses discuss their diversity goals.

*“ The City will provide an inclusive, barrier-free work environment that allows persons with disabilities to contribute as full members of their work teams, and to enjoy the same employment rights as other staff, whether as candidates for employment or as employees. The City is also committed to providing equal access to transportation, buildings, goods and services.”*⁶

² Office, C. M. (n.d.). City manager, administration and policies. City of Ottawa. <https://ottawa.ca/en/city-hall/city-manager-administration-and-policies#section-a22d969b-cd01-4bf4-8942-b900350f3978>

³ City for All Women Initiative. (2017). *People Living With Disabilities: Equity and Inclusion Lens Snapshot*. Page 6. <https://www.cawi-ivtf.org/>. https://documents.ottawa.ca/sites/documents/files/disabil_ss_en.pdf

⁴ City for All Women Initiative. (2017). Page 6.

⁵ City for All Women Initiative. (2017). Page 13.

⁶ **POLICY STATEMENT**. (n.d.). https://app06.ottawa.ca/calendar/ottawa/citycouncil/a-acac/2003/06-18/Duty%20to%20Accommodate_.htm

There are several public examples demonstrating the City's long-term commitment to supporting disability inclusion. One of these examples is the celebration of [AccessAbility Day](#), an event that the City has been commemorating for over 20 years to highlight the importance of embracing disability and accessibility. The event takes place in the last Sunday of May to align with [National AccessAbility Week](#) — a week of celebrations across Canada to raise awareness of the need for accessibility and inclusion across communities and workplaces. The City of Ottawa also commemorates [International Day of Persons with Disability](#), which takes place on December 3 and is a day to promote the rights and well-being of people who have a disability at every level of society.

Building Accessibility for All — Customers and Employees Alike

As is the case with many municipalities, and in keeping with their legal obligations of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation (IASR), the City of Ottawa consults directly with people with lived experience of disability to build and update their accessibility plan.

In the Spring of 2019, the City consulted with people with disabilities for the development of the 2020-2024 City of Ottawa Municipal Accessibility Plan (COMAP). This plan serves as a multi-year strategy of initiatives that will increase accessibility of City programs, facilities, and services. People with disabilities, agencies that support people with disabilities, their caregivers, friends, family members and the general public were invited to provide disability-related feedback.⁷

It has been through this *intentional and intense* engagement with the disability community that the City has made progress both as a provider of services and programs *as well as* an employer.

During the COVID pandemic, it was the disability community that shared with the City that many people were being left behind because of the lack of accessible communication. This was addressed by including American Sign Language (ASL) for all emergency communications. An example of this type of accessible communication is the recording of the [Virtual Town Hall](#), April 9, 2020. Other examples of how the City of Ottawa has responded to meet the needs of its citizens who have a disability and who look for equitable access to programs and services is the use of [beach-ready wheelchairs](#). The program was introduced in 2017.⁸

⁷ Public Engagement Feedback Report, Accessibility Consultations in preparation for the 2020-2024 City of Ottawa Municipal Accessibility Plan. <https://engage.ottawa.ca/Accessibility-Consultations>

⁸ City's amphibious wheelchairs put the beach within reach. (2020, July 14). CBC. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/city-amphibious-wheelchairs-beach-reach-1.5647854#:~:text=All%20her%20life%2C%20whenever%20Delaney,to%20beachgoers%20who%20need%20them.>

Intentional inclusion of people with lived experience has not only enhanced services and programs offered by the City, but it is also impacting its workforce as disability inclusion is a workforce development goal for the City as one of the largest employers in Ottawa.⁹ The City of Ottawa is an active member of the Employment Accessibility Resource Network (EARN), a United Way East Ontario-led community initiative that brings together employers and service providers with a goal of increasing opportunities for meaningful employment for people with disabilities.¹⁰ In 2021, the City of Ottawa was showcased under EARN's **Meet Our Members** blog section, with an interview with Christine Malone, a former Diversity Specialist for the City of Ottawa. In that interview Ms. Malone acknowledges that the City "is working to remove barriers to the workplace for persons with disabilities, and bringing an inclusion lens to all they do."

Throughout the interview, Ms. Malone answers questions related to the City providing employment that includes professional development and career progression for people who have a disability, noting that the City has a volunteer self-identification survey for applicants and City staff to measure how representative the City's staff is and how they compared with the community they serve. When asked about the policies and practices that the City has developed to champion accessibility, Ms. Malone responds:

"The City adheres to the AODA (the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act) and has incorporated diversity and inclusion into its strategic planning; there is a corporate diversity and inclusion plan that sets out specific goals and activities to increase representation and inclusion in the workplace; the City of Ottawa has practices and policies to promote accessibility and inclusion in the workplace, some of these include:

- working with community and service providers to outreach to jobseekers with disabilities;
- ongoing engagement with EARN;
- updating hiring tools and interview practices to increase inclusivity and proactively remove barriers; and finally
- policies include, but are not limited to, equity and diversity policy, workplace accommodation policy, accessibility policy, procedures for accessible information and communication supports."¹¹

⁹ Community and Social Services. (n.d.). Working/doing business. City of Ottawa. <https://ottawa.ca/en/living-ottawa/immigrating-ottawa/workingdoing-business#section-01f3b724-c0c8-4af6-923d-f920a86777d1>

¹⁰ EARN (Employment Accessibility Resource Network). (n.d.). EARN (Employment Accessibility Resource Network) | LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/earn-employment-accessibility-resource-network/>

¹¹ Meet our members: City of Ottawa - EARN | United Way East Ontario. (2021b, January 8). EARN | United Way East Ontario. <https://earn-paire.ca/member-profiles/city/>

Building Diversity in Human Resources Practices

Human Resources plays a crucial role in creating an inclusive workplace. Implementing diversity policies is an essential first step. As mentioned earlier, the Duty to Accommodate Policy Statement from the City of Ottawa makes it clear that the City “demonstrates its commitment to accommodate persons with disabilities by providing a supportive work environment and corporate culture that welcomes such persons. Its practices related to recruitment, training and development, promotion and provision of career opportunities are based on the competency of the candidates. The City encourages the effective utilization of the talents of all of its employees, and will ensure that its human resource management policies reflect this principle.”¹²

And while that policy originated in the early 2000s as part of the legislative responsibility under the AODA, the City of Ottawa has been very proactive in ensuring that it exceeds the minimum requirements under the legislation. For example, the Annual Update of the Municipal Accessibility Plan made in May 2023 shows the City’s active role to advance employment initiatives for hiring people who have a disability. The City reported that the Workplace, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging unit updated the **Count Me In!** self-identification questionnaire for employees. According to their Accessibility plan, “employees who identify as persons with disabilities indicated the highest increase in representation from all equity-deserving groups listed in the questionnaire, from 7.7 percent in December 2021 to 15.3 percent in December 2022.”¹³

The City of Ottawa has many examples of how accessibility and inclusion more broadly is embedded in their day-to-day operations both as a provider of services and an employer.

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Across the City

City-wide implementation of equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging is led by the Gender and Race Equity, Inclusion, Indigenous Relations and Social Development (GREIIRSD) Services, which sits within the Community and Social Services Department. GREIIRSD’s mandate is to foster equity and inclusivity within our workforce and communities while addressing the emerging needs of our diverse population through strategies and actions. Some of these actions include continued commitment to understanding and implementing reconciliation, building an inclusive workplace that represents the communities we serve, applying a women, gender and race equity approach in policies and decisions, and engaging with priority populations to support their unique needs.

In 2023, the City was recognized as one of Canada’s Best Diversity Employers with “mandatory Equity and Inclusion Lens training (to help employees consider equity and to build inclusive

¹² POLICY STATEMENT. (n.d.-b). https://app06.ottawa.ca/calendar/ottawa/citycouncil/a-acac/2003/06-18/Duty%20to%20Accommodate_.htm

¹³ City of Ottawa Municipal Accessibility Plan — Annual Update (2023) report. 2022 Employment Initiatives. Page 40. <https://pub-ottawa.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=128059>

practices into their day-to-day work), equity and inclusion lens handbook to promote inclusive interactions between City staff as well as residents, bias awareness training, leading a diverse workforce (required training for managers and supervisors)¹⁴ among other initiatives.

Disability Inclusion — Leadership Commitment Through Mentorship

A quick check on a dictionary and mentorship is defined as “the influence, guidance, or direction given by a mentor.”¹⁵ Mentorship programs to develop and grow talent inside an organization are common. But an innovative approach to support the development of potential candidates, specifically talent who have a disability, has been adopted by the City of Ottawa — **MentorAbility**. This is a partnership with Performance Plus Rehabilitative Care Inc. (PPRC), a local bilingual vocational rehabilitation service provider who has been working with people who have a disability since 1994.

MentorAbility Canada is led by the Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE) and PPRC is a local co-ordinator for this national initiative. MentorAbility provides one-time mentoring opportunities for protégés (job seekers with disabilities) to learn more about careers in the sectors where they want to work. Adopting initiatives such as MentorAbility has increased capacity for leaders, managers and supervisors to create disability inclusive workplaces across Canada.

PPRC reached out to Stacey Wu, Specialist, Outreach and Engagement at the City of Ottawa, to organize this mentorship opportunity. They have written a case study of the successful experience with this mentorship pilot. The original goal for the pilot event was five mentorship matches. As described in the case study “this was a pioneering effort for both parties, and we wanted to test the waters to see if it would succeed. To our delight, we were able to hold twelve one-on-one mentor matches. With such strong interest, the event was a resounding success. We (PPRC) learned the power of partnership: preparing mentors and protégés leads to productive conversations and successful mentoring. The post-match survey results speak to this success: 87.5% of mentors and 80% of protégés stated that they would be very likely to or would participate in this type of event again. We hope that we can conduct more events like this in the future.”¹⁶

In addition to opportunities to mentor external talent, the City’s Affinity Groups provide an opportunity to promote and develop disability inclusion. According to the City’s Annual Update for Accessibility Plan (2023), the City’s affinity groups “were quite active in 2022, which included the Employees with Disabilities Affinity Group. An article entitled **Disability Pride and the International Day of Persons with Disabilities** was published by the Affinity Group lead in the

¹⁴ Mediacorp Canada Inc. staff editors, & Kristina Leung and Stephanie Leung, M. C. Inc. staff editors. Top employer: City of Ottawa. <https://reviews.canadastop100.com/top-employer-city-of-ottawa>

¹⁵ Mentorship. (2024). In Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mentorship>

¹⁶ Grant, I. (2023, January 19). A MentorAbility partnership: PPRC Inc. & the city of Ottawa. Performance Plus Rehabilitative Care Inc. <https://pprc.ca/blog/a-mentorability-partnership-pprc-inc-the-city-of-ottawa/>

internal **In the Loop** newsletter, which included quotations from active members as they came together to reflect on what disability meant to them in celebration of International Day of Persons with Disabilities.”¹⁷

In conclusion, it is not difficult to find several examples of how the City of Ottawa is taking a leading role in Ontario ensuring that accessibility is embedded in every aspect of their operations from program development and service delivery, human resources processes and workforce development to the way in which their leadership builds awareness and executes on initiatives that drive them to being a **disability-inclusive business**.

If you have any questions regarding the information presented in this case study, please email us at info@odenetwork.com.

¹⁷ City of Ottawa Municipal Accessibility Plan – Annual Update (2023) report. 2022 Employment Initiatives. Page 42. <https://pub-ottawa.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=128059>