CORPORATE STRATEGY

TOOL 3: STARTING YOUR JOURNEY TOWARDS DISABILITY CONFIDENCE

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Who is this for

High priority
- Executives and senior management
- Cross-departmental managers

What guidance does it provide?

- How to navigate the preliminary stages of your journey towards disability confidence

Take-home points

- No two businesses are the same, your starting point, as well as the practices, policies, and procedures you undertake to become more inclusive may look different than your neighbour's.
- If you or your staff feel uneasy about interacting with or accommodating a person with disability, a focus on education is needed.
- Although accessibility and disability confidence are two different terms, they are closely intertwined. A disability confident employer recognizes the value in accessibility and implements solutions to ensure that the needs of all people, including people with disabilities, are met.
- Lead a culture movement by framing the issue and positioning a rationale, recognize and reward collective action, enable employees to contribute to your disability strategy, carve out spaces for innovation and enhance solidarity with the use of symbolism
- A topic as expansive as disability confidence touches all aspects of your business, and it can be tempting to jump back and forth between stages in the employee life cycle or focus on too many initiatives all at once. If you are not sure where to start in your journey towards disability confidence, review the tool once more for practical suggestions.

Identify Your Starting Point

Recognizing the need for culture change and full inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace is a monumental step. There is no silver bullet that can get you there, but strong leadership, accountability, and strategic measurement can make an extraordinary difference when it comes to building your organizational disability confidence over time.

Growing your disability confidence won't happen overnight – it's a gradual process.

And because no two businesses are the same, your starting point, as well as the practices, policies, and procedures you undertake to become more inclusive may look different than your neighbour's.

- When you table disability as an agenda item at your board meeting, you break the long withstanding silence on disability and create the opportunity for dialogue and commitment to disability inclusion.
- When you include disability confidence in a C-Suite portfolio, you create the structure and scaffolding to support calls to action.
- When you invite and engage all workers to be a part of the change, you foster a sense of responsibility that sparks a social movement across your organization – one that develops a workplace culture that is committed to supporting and including people with disabilities.

Navigating The Preliminary Stages of the Journey

We understand that you might still have questions. We are here to help. We've put together a few preliminary concerns that corporate leaders may have after choosing to say 'yes' to disability confidence and have mapped on how-to guidance and suggestions to support you through it.

1. What if I don't know how to be disability confident?
A Focus on Knowledge Sharing

On the one hand, disability confidence is about having the knowledge and the know-how to implement accessible solutions for employees in the workplace. On the other hand, disability confidence is about embracing the unfamiliar, and having the courage to acknowledge when you don't have all the answers.

Disability confident employers lean into what they don't know.
They lead with curiosity instead of criticism or insecurity.

If you or your staff feel uneasy about interacting with or accommodating a person with disability, a focus on education is needed. Developing a workplace that is welcoming and inclusive of people with disabilities requires everyone to commit to a culture of learning – one that always seeks to find new, innovative solutions when something is inaccessible or not working:

- Communicate an organization-wide commitment to disability confidence
- Equip your workers with the knowledge to support colleagues and customers with disabilities
- Construct clear and effective avenues for communication, so workers and managers know who or where to go to for more information
- Build in time and space to discuss workers' concerns or questions about disability
- Discuss the potential risks and develop strategies to overcome them

Mandating Ongoing Education and Training

- Require all workers to participate in routine training opportunities to increase their awareness about disability
- Do your due diligence to identify and avoid ableist misconceptions of disability in the workplace
- Get the facts, inform your staff, and ensure that you are not making assumptions based upon a label. For more information, please click Culture Tool 4 - Addressing Barriers to Culture Change

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Case example

Education and training opportunities can even focus on particular staff groups, such as those who provide products and services to customers with disabilities. RBC provides training to staff and contract workers whose duties involve interaction with the public or other third parties. Training includes:

- Accessible customer service at RBC
- How to interact and communicate with person with various types of disabilities
- How to interact with persons with disabilities who use an assistive device or require the assistance of a service animal or a support person
- How to use equipment or devices available on RBC's premises or otherwise provided by RBC that may assist with the provision of goods and services to clients with disabilities
- What to do if a person with a particular type of disability is having difficulty accessing the provision of goods and services.

Training is provided on an ongoing basis and is provided to appropriate staff and contract workers as soon as practicable.

What role can the union play in growing your Disability Confidence? Unions have long had an important role in advancing disability rights in the workplace, and in building disability confidence amongst their membership. Unions lobby for improved legislation, workplace health, disability plans and accessibility improvements in workplace.

Constructive collaboration between the employer and the union can help organizations avert or minimize claims and complaints related to disability inclusion.

2. Who is in charge of disability inclusion?
Leading cross-organizational commitment

The role of the board is crucial for moving the needle when it comes to disability. No matter the industry, and no matter the company, senior executives and other leaders determine the strategic direction of the company. You hold the key to unlocking the economic contributions of 6.2 million individuals with disabilities across Canada. You set in motion the domino effect – when you invest in disability, you are also:

- Actively protecting the human rights of individuals with disabilities, and enable access to fair and equitable employment opportunities for all
- Widely demonstrating your support for and allyship of the disability movement
- Investing in a plethora of strategic business benefits. For more information, visit Corporate Strategy Tool 2 - Identifying the Rationale for Change

Like any other business priority, disability confidence cannot be addressed by just one department alone. While a top-down approach might be effective to spark a movement, it most certainly will not sustain one. And relegating disability inclusion to HR will not do the trick either. **Workplace culture lives in the hearts and minds of all employees – including frontline staff and middle management.**

For example, hiring managers are important actors who kick start the employment life cycle for jobseekers with disabilities. To make your workplace truly disability confident, everyone must have a seat at the table, and everyone has a part to play.

Inspiring a movement within your organization

Leading a cultural movement across your organization is not easy. However, there are number of lessons we can learn from successful movement makers: [1]

Frame the issue:
- Position a rationale for change that spans beyond personal gain – Why is disability confidence meaningful? Why should employees feel a sense of responsibility or deep desire for the full inclusion of colleagues and customers with disabilities?
- Show employees how disability confidence fits in with your company DNA

Demonstrate quick wins:
- Recognize and reward collective action, even when the wins are small
- Honor the strengths of your existing workplace – spotlight what your teams are doing well to support accessible employment

Harness networks:
- Enable employees to contribute to your disability strategy – people tend to feel more committed to movements when there is a shared purpose
- Identify and activate networks for change – Look for opportunities to join a global disability network. [2] Or can you collaborate with local disability organizations to spread ideas and co-develop initiatives or events?

Create safe spaces:
- Carve out spaces where you and your workers can innovate – organize think tank meetings or create innovation labs to support new ways of thinking or behaviour change that welcomes and supports people with disabilities
- Be aware that what is safe for one might not be safe for another, and build in ways to protect workers' privacy and confidentiality

Embrace symbols:
- Enhance solidarity in the pursuit of disability confidence with the use of symbolism– use universal design for every new product of service, create an open and accessible office layout, give out awards for excellence in disability inclusion, recognize disability-specific days or months with organization-wide events, etc.

3. How does accessibility relate to disability confidence?
Bridging the gap between accessibility and disability confidence

With the passing of the Accessible Canada Act (2019), [3] many businesses are focusing their attention on accessibility. While definitions of accessibility vary, the concept of accessibility is grounded in the identification, removal, and prevention of barriers to access among people with disabilities. Whereas, disability confidence refers to having the skills, knowledge, and the confidence to recruit and retain workers with disabilities.

Although accessibility and disability confidence are two different terms, they are closely intertwined. A disability confident employer recognizes the value in accessibility and implements solutions to ensure that the needs of all people, including people with disabilities, are met. A disability confident organization also ventures further by working to meet and exceed accessibility requirements.

Normalizing the accessible way

Accessibility might not be a priority for your business right now, but it should be, because: [4]

- Some workers with disabilities choose not to disclose their disability, even when they do experience barriers in the workplace
- Workers with disabilities can learn to self-accommodate and develop their own solutions to barriers they face, which may not be sustainable
- Workers who do not currently have disabilities may acquire a disability in the future
- Workers may be living with episodic disabilities and experience fluctuating periods and degrees of wellness and disability
- Applicants with disabilities may experience barriers when applying to your workplace

We use accessibility features everyday. While you might not think of yourself as a person with a disability, you might frequently make adjustments in the workplace to accommodate yourself. For instance, think about how glasses are an accommodation that many people use to be able to see better.

Approximately 54% of Canadians between the ages of 40-64 use glasses or contact lenses to improve their visual acuity. [5]

Disability confident employers do not see accessibility as a legal hurdle or another checkbox they are obligated to tick off; they appreciate and leverage it for what it really is – a business priority and an asset to everything they do. They recognize that accessibility benefits everyone… people who don't have disabilities, people who do, as well as the business as a whole.

4. How can I get our commitment off the ground?

Prioritizing strategic planning

With any business imperative or major business undertaking, creating a disability confident workplace requires you to establish a goal and strategize how to best meet that goal.

Assign disability to an executive portfolio:
- Appoint a senior manager to act as the lead on disability inclusion at your company
- Establish a diverse committee on disability confidence to drive your strategic plan forward

Consult stakeholders, including persons with lived experience of disability:
- Contract external stakeholders and expert advisors with lived experience of disability to provide feedback and guide your work.
- Not only can they support research (e.g., performing audits, leading focus groups on accessibility), but they can help you build a strategy to create a more inclusive workplace and contribute to strategic initiatives.

Delegate roles throughout your organization:
- Inspire accountability throughout your middle management teams and provide clear and specific directives for how they can implement and track your strategic plan
- Recognize potential risks and develop strategies for how to overcome them

Communicating and raising awareness

Once you have painted a picture of what you want to achieve and how you will do it, share your vision of disability confidence with the rest of your company. There are multiple modes of communication you can use:

- Sharing your message on the company intranet
- Posting your report on employee social networks
- Sending a company-wide email
- Hosting a CEO address on a video meeting platform
- Planning a virtual or in-person kick off event
- Writing and circulating comprehensive report

When first raising awareness of disability confidence in your organization, make sure your message hits the following marks:

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- Ensure disability confidence is communicated as a business priority
- Clarify that disability is diverse
- Use plain language in your announcements
- Indicate who will be leading the implementation
- Identify who will be supporting the implementation
- Outline opportunities for employees to contribute
- Specify when employees can expect progress updates
- Include contact information for a person who can address any questions or concerns

Developing unique and innovative initiatives

Strategic initiatives are the ways in which a company enacts their strategic plan. To effectively translate goals and visions into practice, a transformative initiative should include:

- Fresh and compelling messaging that introduces the change needed
- Clear links to your organization's overall strategic plan
- A well-defined scope (e.g., timeline, key activities and milestones, and resources required)
- Cross-organizational buy-in and support
- A detailed plan for implementation
- Measures of change to gauge progress

The nuances of your industry and sector, as well as the intricate needs, processes, partners, and people at your organization will shape your approach to disability confidence. There are many facets of the employee life cycle where there will be room for improvement https://toolkit.ccrw.org

A topic as expansive as disability confidence touches all aspects of your business, and it can be tempting to jump back and forth between stages in the employee life cycle or focus on too many initiatives all at once.

If you are not sure where to start in your journey towards disability confidence, remember that anything you do is better than nothing. Start small and build your confidence and capacity for change. Take a look at these suggestions and to get the ball rolling:

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- Strengthen anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies and ensure that these are communicated across each level of the organization.
- Provide routine disability awareness training for all employees on essential topics such as disability sensitivity, accessibility training, neurodiversity training, mental health training, and more
- Develop employee resource groups or support programs that focus on sharing lived experiences and breaking down negative attitudes towards disabilities within your organization.
- Audit and review your employment policies and practices to identify where to focus your efforts next.

5. How will I know when we get there?
Engaging in consistent measurement
Without establishing clear and thoughtful measures to monitor disability performance, organizations risk reverting to their previous behaviors and ways of thinking – jeopardizing their investment and progress towards disability confidence.

Identify indicators of change:
- Collectively define which business-specific dimensions of disability inclusion you will monitor
- Ensure that metrics are relevant to your local context and map onto risk areas or opportunities, the progress of strategic initiatives, or the return on investment

IIdentify targets:
- Set SMART (i.e., specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely) goals that adhere to the goals in your strategic plan
- Communicate these goals widely so that employees know exactly what they are working towards

Routinely monitor your performance:
- Develop a formal plan for measuring your progress – who will do what, and how often?
- Properly train the employees that will collect and calculate, and analyze your metrics

Consistent, strategic measurement is crucial in generating evidence to support senior leadership's commitment to the best practice of disability confidence. Data showcasing progress can also be shared outwardly with stakeholders, leveraged to inspire further change, and used to secure additional funds and resources to support strategic initiatives focused on disability confidence.

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