

DCIF – Culture Tool 7: Embedding Accessibility into Workplace Culture

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Tags

Who is this tool for?

High Level Priority:

- HR Professionals
- Executives and senior management

Practical Information:

- Cross-departmental managers

Useful to know:

- Frontline staff

What guidance does this tool provide?

- A deeper understanding of the decision around whether workers disclose their disability
- Recommendations for how to create a culture that supports workers with disabilities who do and do not disclose
- Specific examples of how to communicate the availability of accessibility supports during recruitment and hiring, as well as on the job

Take home messages:

- An integral component of an accessibility-focused workplace culture is adopting a trust-based, **de-medicalized** process to deliver workplace accommodations across all stages of the employee life cycle.
- **Disclosure is individualized.** There is no 'be-all-end-all' approach to **disclosure**. The process of **disclosure** will look and feel different across all workers, employers, industries, and contexts
- Workplace accommodations should be available from end-to-end. This means that the moment a candidate with a disability begins contact with your company, each staff member they are met with (e.g., a recruiter, interviewer, manager, etc.) works to ensure that they can compete fairly based on their career potential and ability to work.

An Accessibility-Focused Culture

An integral component of an accessibility-focused workplace culture is adopting a trust-based, **de-medicalized** process to deliver workplace accommodations across all stages of the employee life cycle. While accommodations are an excellent means to support accessibility in the workplace, employers cannot provide this type of support unless they are made aware of an individual's need for an accommodation.

What is disability disclosure?

Disclosure is a personal decision. The choice to make a disability known to others can be daunting. There are many reasons why a candidate or employee with a disability may choose not to **disclose**. It is incredibly important that the agency and decision to disclose (if, when, where, how) lies with the employee with a disability. They should not feel pressured to do so by any means. If an employee **discloses** to you, that doesn't necessarily mean they will disclose to others.

Disclosure is individualized. There is no 'be-all-end-all' approach to **disclosure**. The process of **disclosure** will look and feel different across all workers, employers, industries, and contexts. Be aware that **disclosure** can happen at several critical timepoints, such as on a job application, before or during an interview, or at the time of job offer. After a successful candidate begins their role, they can also **disclose** at any point in time.

Disability is Not Always Visible

While some disabilities are **disclosed** as soon as a candidate enters an interview room, many disabilities are not readily observable.

According to the Canadian Survey on Disability (2017), one in five (i.e., 22%) people in Canada over 15 years old – had one or more disabilities.¹ That equates to almost 6.2 million individuals. Disabilities related to pain, flexibility, mobility, and mental health were the most common. Additionally, among youth, mental health disabilities were the most common, at 8%.¹

Pop up: Where disability is not immediately apparent to other people, the term 'invisible disability' is commonly used. Sometimes, disabilities may be invisible in one setting, but apparent in other settings.

Negotiating the already complex decision to disclose one's disability can be particularly challenging for individuals with **invisible disabilities**.^{2,3} While workers with **invisible disabilities** may be protected against discrimination and microaggressions in the workplace, they may have to explain and 'prove' their disability to others if they choose to **disclose**.⁴

Creating A Workplace Culture That Supports Self-Identification

The choice about whether to self-identify as a worker with a disability always rests with the worker. An employer is legally not allowed to ask a worker if they have a disability.

In an inclusive workplace, disability self-identification yields important benefits for both the employer, and the worker:

- Accommodations and workplace supports can be implemented to ensure that workers have what they need to thrive on the job

- An inclusive workplace culture supportive of workers with disabilities can be perpetuated

However, workers with disabilities may not disclose their disability because of the overt or covert discrimination or **microaggressions** they could experience in the workplace. Although discrimination against people with disabilities is prohibited by law in Canada [[Legal Briefing](#)], there is no guarantee that it won't happen.

*Employers have a critical role in breaking down **disclosure barriers**.*

Across an organization, steps can be taken to foster a culture that supports a worker who do, and do not, disclose their disability:

Stigma and misconceptions attached to disability may hamper an individual's chances of getting hired despite being the best person for the job. Oftentimes, this is due to systemic hiring biases or misconceptions rooted in **ableism**.

- Communicate your company's commitment towards **disability confidence** and your accommodation policy as early as possible during the recruitment process and on public facing promotional materials
- Reiterate that accommodations and additional supports are available for everyone employee at multiple touchpoints such as the time of submission, scheduling the interview, and conducting the interview
- Build diverse hiring teams that understand the value in diversity and make decisions on the basis of talent and potential
- Hire accessibility consultants to audit your recruitment process to ensure it is barrier free

After disclosing, relationships at work may be negatively impacted. Employees with disabilities may find themselves face to face with colleagues who are judgmental, discriminatory, awkward, or believe they are being dishonest.^{6,7}

- Provide regular opportunities for employees to learn about and discuss topics such as diversity and inclusion, accessibility, and disability in the context of your organization through employee resource groups, workshops, speaker series, conferences, etc.
- Share top-level commitment to an inclusive workplace culture at cross organization events (e.g., CEO addresses, coffee chats, within onboarding materials)
- Create and strengthening anti-**ableist** policies, programs, and procedures, including those on harassment, discrimination

Discussion about workplace accommodations is sometimes an arduous task. If an employer is resistant and a workplace culture is not accessibility-focused, conversations around accommodations can be cumbersome and may lead to further conflict.⁸

- Understand that accommodations are tools to help employees with disabilities thrive and succeed – when they are equipped to do their best work, your company also succeeds
- Ensure that all workers are aware of the workplace accommodation policy
- Be transparent about the process to request an accommodation – explain the **de-medicalized** process (for more information, please click [Accommodations Tool 6 - Developing Your Approaches to Workplace Accommodations](#)), detail the steps required of the worker and the employer, and be prepared to implement accommodations as quickly as possible

- Routinely monitor, evaluate, and act on feedback regarding your company’s accommodation process
- Establish grievance processes, where concerns and complaints are taken seriously, and supports are readily available for persons who are affected

Perceptions about an employee’s performance may become altered. For example, managers or colleagues may view employees with disabilities as ‘less capable,’ be reluctant to ask them to complete a task or pass them over for a promotion.⁵

- Identify disability champions and role models within your company who can inspire cultural shifts in attitudes towards workers with disabilities
- Take the time to address false misconceptions about workers with disabilities with all staff. For more details, see [Culture Tool 4 - Addressing Barriers to Culture Change](#)
- Review and revise performance management and career advancement processes to ensure that opportunities for growth, development, and feedback and equity-focused. For more details, see [CD Tool 3 - Determining Advancement Opportunities for Workers with Disabilities](#)

Intersectionality Vignette

Camille Thibeau

Hi there, I’m Camille, and I am a content creator at a mid-sized organization. When I first applied to my organization in 2020, I disclosed that I am neurodivergent in my job interview. I had done a little bit of research and learned about the organization, and I felt that it was a safe space to be able to disclose that information. Everybody was very communicative and responsive to my requests and to my needs. And they were very encouraging of me speaking up for myself.

When I was onboarded, I was offered a workplace accommodation assessment. I did that with an occupational therapist, and we discovered some ways that I hadn’t even thought of yet to support me in the workplace. Some of those things included things like light covers, noise canceling headphones, a fan both for airflow and for white noise, a sit-stand desk to incorporate more of that movement, and a rotating work from home schedule. And so those were accommodations that were put into place for my sensory processing disorder.

I’m neurodivergent, and I identify with having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and generalized anxiety. I am also autistic, and I have lived experience of trauma. And so, all those different intersections along with some different physical issues, they can kind of get in the way and sometimes make it challenging for me to be able to be my best self at work. It was really important for me to find a job where I felt that I could disclose early on in the application process, so that I could really set myself up for success. Previously, I had been working in food service and hospitality for 18 years. Although it’s a very harsh industry, it’s a passion of mine, but it is also extremely hard on the mental health. After I left that industry and I went back to postsecondary school, I knew that going forward, I was really going to have to figure out what would best work for my needs. At my workplace, not only have I been included, but I’ve been accommodated – in terms of my disability, my physical capacity, and a lot of other areas such as social, political, and emotional, which is important to me.

It was so impactful for me to feel that the culture in my workplace was accepting and embracing of who I was and my differences, especially when you’re somebody who has faced alienation or marginalization and other experiences in your life. I completed a neurodiversity training with all of my staff – that was implemented to help me and my colleagues work together, and to educate the workforce on

neurodiversity inclusion.

I've also had lots of opportunities for my voice to be heard. I have been able to share my goals for advancement and professional development. I've found that those opportunities to keep learning and moving forward with my career, have been accommodating of my learning style, who I am, my neurotype, and my neurodiversity. All those things combined – the inclusive culture, the diversity at work, the promotion and support of seeking accommodations, and getting accommodated – have really made this a dream job for me.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I'm now fully working from home. I do come by the office, but I'm able to work in a way that really matches my strengths and abilities. I can maintain long term physical and mental wellness because I have supports in place. I'm really thankful for that. I'm proud to be a part of an organization that leads the way when it comes to accessibility and accommodations. They do what is right, what is best for their own staff, and I just want to show my gratitude.

Providing Accommodations from End-to-End

For an in-depth look at best practices for implementing workplace accommodations, please visit [Accommodations Tool 2 - Exploring Types of Accommodations](#).

Workplace accommodations should be available from end-to-end. This means that the moment a candidate with a disability begins contact with your company, each staff member they are met with (e.g., a recruiter, interviewer, manager, etc.) works to ensure that they can compete fairly based on their career potential and ability to work. This universal approach to accommodations continues on to support the retention of all workers.

Here are some of the promising practices that inclusive employers have already woven into their policies and processes to provide accommodations to all:⁹

Supporting accommodations during the recruitment and hiring process

- Communicate your commitment towards disability confidence and your accommodation policy as early as possible during the recruitment process.
- Ensure that your public facing promotional materials (e.g., job advertisements) emphasize your commitment and accommodation policy
- Reiterate that accommodations and additional supports are available for every applicant at multiple touchpoints such as the time of submission, scheduling the interview, and conducting the interview
- Ensure that recruiters and hiring managers understand that accommodations create equity in the recruitment process
- Build a process to identify, procure, and implement accommodations as quickly as possible so that applicants with disabilities treated in the same manner as applicants without disabilities
- Do not use pre-employment tests that are inaccessible

Providing universally accessible workplace accommodations on the job

- Discuss with an employee what supports they need to be able to do their best work
- Deliver accommodations as promptly as possible to ensure that start dates are not delayed for employees with disabilities

- Routinely review the efficacy of the accommodation and make changes to appropriately support the employee
- Understand the need to reassess workplace adjustments as an employee's role evolves and their career advances
- Ensure that HR is not the sole body responsible for the provision of workplace adjustments; organization-wide support is needed from all, including IT, procurement, occupational health and safety, facilities, direct managers, and more.

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