WORKPLACE CULTURE

TOOL 4: ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO CULTURE CHANGE

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Who is this for

High priority
- DEI and HR Professionals
- Senior Executives and management

Practical Information
- Direct Line Managers

Useful to Know
- Frontline staff

What guidance does it provide?

- Understanding the different factors that may influence behaviour change
- Understanding ableism in the context of a workplace
- How to shift attitudes, challenge workplace norms, and empower workers to build an inclusive workplace culture

Take-home points

- Ableist views position the person with the disability as 'the problem,' rather than the environmental barriers that exist in society as 'the problem.'
- To help avoid tokenism, educate workers about the types of bias, ensure to chose an unconscious bias training that goes beyond 'sensitization' to disability and training is practical and action-oriented, and lastly dedicate time for employees to explore their biases and encourage them make connections with how they can unlearn and change their ways of thinking

What Does it Take to Change Culture?

No matter where you are on your journey towards disability confidence, shifting the culture within a workplace can be challenging to address.

It takes a powerful movement to inspire workers to re-wire their ways of thinking and change their behaviour.

To create excitement and fuel the capacity for change, leaders, management, and employees need to understand why their behaviours and attitudes need changing. They need to be able to pick out the weaknesses in a typical corporate culture and fill those gaps with the strengths of a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace.

Factors Impacting Behaviour Change

Case Study: Ezra is a claims manager at an insurance company and manages a team of claims adjusters, analysts, and clerks – one of these workers is Lee, is a neurodiverse claims clerk. Ezra has noticed that Lee tends to be left out at lunch and in other social situations in the office. Ezra has even witnessed Lee's colleagues making fun of Lee when he is not around. When Lee brings this up with Ezra, Ezra tells Lee to 'lighten up' about it.

1. **Attitudes:** Our personal thoughts and feelings towards something (e.g., Ezra believes that Lee has trouble fitting in with the rest of the team because he is neurodiverse).
2. **Workplace Norms:** How we view the ideas of other people's thoughts and feelings towards something (e.g., Ezra assumes that the rest of the team feel awkward around Lee and don't get along with him).
3. **Sense of Control:** The extent to which we believe we control our behaviour (e.g., Ezra doesn't think that they can do anything more to include Lee, that it is up to Lee to make himself more likeable amongst his peers and isn't sure how to make the workplace more inclusive for people with disabilities).

In this scenario, Ezra holds negative attitudes towards Lee because of his disability, and does not act to change the work environment, including the behaviour of colleagues, that is discriminatory towards Lee. Oftentimes, like in the case with Ezra and Lee's colleagues, ableism underlies the negative attitudes, stereotypes, and stigmas that we hold towards people with disabilities.

Intersectionality Avatar
Dante

Dante: I am a big Black guy in his fifties. I have had my share of racism, fatphobia, lookism, ageism and what not. Because I was fat and Black, I had to work twice as hard to show that I was not lazy, a prejudice my "type" of people often have to deal with. My work used to be double-checked and I used to get performance warnings a lot more than others, although I could complete any task faster and better than anyone.

I am happy to be living in a time when people say enough is enough! Things have changed over the years but there is still work to do. Nonetheless, I am happy to see that I am finally appreciated for what I bring to the table. But more importantly, simply for being a human in need of a job, like everyone else. (After 'What does it take to change culture: factors impacting behaviour change')

Understanding Abelism

Ontario Human Rights Commission uses the following definition for ableism: [1], [2]

Ableism is a belief system, analogous to racism, sexism, or ageism, that sees persons with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and participate, or of less inherent value than others. Ableism may be conscious or unconscious, and may be embedded in institutions, systems, or the broader culture of a society. It can limit the opportunities of persons with disabilities and reduce their inclusion in the life of their communities.

Ableist views position the person with the disability as 'the problem,' rather than the environmental barriers that exist in society as 'the problem.'

- Ableist views are often linked to discrimination, harassment, and bias and stigma surrounding disability in the workplace.
- These false perceptions can lead to inaccurate assessments of workers' abilities, harmful or exclusionary behaviour in the workplace, or even the development of policies that negative impact people with disabilities.
- All of these contribute to a workplace culture that is not inclusive of workers with disabilities.

"At BMO, we are committed to having zero barriers, and to fostering a culture of inclusion for all where everyone feels like they belong. Recently, we launched or Learn From Difference For All training, where employees can learn how they can be more inclusive with their colleagues and customers every day. Employees are also encouraged to self-advocate, to promote the importance of being open about our differences and drive progress through our Count Me In (CMI) campaign." - Ishita Walia, Corporate Communication Manager

Read more from Ontario's 'Policy on ableism and discrimination based on disability.'

Preventing and Addressing Ableism in the Workplace

In addition to following the Accessible Canada Act [3] and working to identify, remove, and prevent barriers for people with disabilities, there are other steps that employers can take to combat ableism. To really move the needle, check out these suggestions for how to shift attitudes, challenge workplace norms, and empower workers to build an inclusive workplace culture.

Creating Anti-Ableist Policies and Procedures

- Create and strengthening anti-ableist policies and procedures, including those on harassment, discrimination, and accommodation
- When developing and revising policies, look to Workplace Culture Tool 3 - Creating Inclusive Workplace Policies for best practices.
- Establish and maintain and accessible employment practices across the employment life cycle that will build and support an inclusive employment environment where workers with disabilities can fully contribute
- Create accessible feedback, grievance, and complaint processes, where submissions are dealt with in a fair, equitable, and effective manner

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PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING ABLEISM IN THE WORKPLACE

Focusing on Inclusive Communications

- Follow the best practices showcased in the Communication Tool 1 - An Intro to Accessible Communication
- Develop an internal language guide to illustrate inclusive, respectful, and dignified language that is expected of employees in the workplace
- Provide materials in alternate formats as soon as possible, upon request
- Review all communications and messaging to ensure that ableist beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives are not reflected - this includes avoiding the use of pictures, jokes, terminology, stereotypes, etc. that are rooted in ableism

As unions provide an increased voice for workers on the job, evidence shows that a unionized environment may help workers with disabilities to discuss their accommodation needs with employers. Representatives from the union can help support and inform not just individual workers but also aid in making the workplace overall more open, communicative and a more inclusive environment. By collaborating with unions as a form of worker engagement, employers satisfy to the ACA standards on consultation to help facilitate communication and worker participation in planning and strategizing for accessibility.

Enhance Accessibility in the Workplace

- Ensure all workers are aware of the workplace accommodation policy and understand the process to request an accommodation
- Implement appropriate accommodations as quickly as possible
- Adopt a universal and barrier-free approach to design. For more details, click Built Environment Tool 1 - Understanding the Building Blocks of Inclusive Design

Take Steps to Address Bias in the Workplace

- Avoid tokenism, which can be described as including disabled persons in non-influential roles to create the illusion of being equitable and inclusive
- Educate workers about the types of bias that exist (infographic below)
- Ensure that if you do choose to undergo unconscious bias training, it goes beyond 'sensitization' to disability and training is practical and action-oriented,
- Dedicate time for employees to explore their biases and encourage them make connections with how they can unlearn and change their ways of thinking
- Take the Harvard Implicit Association Test to learn about your unconscious beliefs

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Stereotyping

When someone ascribes to a widely help belief about a particular category of people, whether because of anecdotal evidence, portrayal in media, or other subconscious impressions

Halo Effect

When someone has a positive association with a person's characteristic and automatically assumes that the person is qualified based on that irrelevant factor

Pitchfork Effect

When someone has a negative association with a person's characteristic and automatically assumes the person is not qualified based on that irrelevant factor

Nonverbal Bias

When someone makes an evaluation of a person based upon their body language, personal appearance, or style of dress.

Affinity Bias

When someone identifies non-work related similarities, and makes a preferrable evaluation of a person because of those similarities.

Protype Bias

When someone routinely looks for a similar type of person to fill open positions.

Mandate Ongoing Education and Training

- Require that all workers to participate in routine training opportunities to increase their awareness about disability
- Review this starting point for potential trainings you can seek out https://toolkit.ccrw.org
- 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

Fact: Workers should not be limited in their role, on the basis of their disability.

It is inevitable that all workers will fail and succeed on the job. Be weary of the inclination to hold someone back from a position or a promotion because you are worried that they may fall short. If a person with a disability is the most qualified candidate, they should be appointed and given the opportunity to succeed. If the individual is struggling, a disability confident employer will recognize the value that the employee brings to the workplace and identify solutions to best support their success.

Fact: Individuals with disabilities have the education I need.

Approximately 80% of people with milder disabilities and just over 50% of people with severe disabilities have a university diploma. [4] The National Educational Association of Disabled Students found that approximately 60% of students with disabilities plan to pursue further education or career development post-graduation, with 38% intending to apply to graduate school and 22% intending to apply to other professional institutions4.

Fact: With the right accommodations and supports, workers with disabilities will not need any more assistance than someone without a disability.

If you have hired the right person for the job, your worker with a disability will not require extra attention or time to complete their duties. This is simply not the case with proper training, accommodations, and supports. Individuals with disabilities typically have excellent problem-solving skills and have learned to live with their disability in a way that works best for them. A small percentage of people with disabilities require personal aids at work. In fact, the most commonly required type of workplace accommodations are flexible work arrangements. [5]

People are disabled by the barriers that exist in their environment and society. Top companies who recognize this have adopted accessible solutions in the workplace and enabled the immense economic contribution of millions of people with disabilities. According to TD Economics, employing more people with disabilities could boost the Canadian economy by $50 billion. [6]

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Assumptions based on cost and accommodations

Fact: Employers in Canada have the legal duty to accommodate.

In Canada, employers have a legal duty to accommodate workers with disabilities until the point of undue hardship. For more information, follow Legal Briefing and Accommodations Tool 1 - Understanding Workplace Accommodations. Without knowing, you might already be making accommodations for your current employees (i.e., leaving for personal appointments, taking lunch at different times, working from home, etc.). Everyone does their job differently based on their skillsets, preferences, and past experiences. Often, employees with disabilities come up with their own creative solutions, which can positively impact your team.

Fact: The most common workplace accommodations are not costly.

Among working aged employees with disabilities, 53% do not require any workplace accommodations. [5] Most accommodations do not even involve a cost (i.e., changes to job duties, modified hours of work) or are relatively simple and inexpensive to implement. For those that do have a cost, they are likely under $500 [7] and benefits of accommodation relative to cost (i.e., employee productivity because of appropriate accommodations) result in better business outcomes. [8] As well, there are government programs which can defer some or all of the cost of the accommodation. In nearly every case, accommodations have much more to do with creativity, flexibility, and sound management practices than expensive structural modifications or specialized technology.

Assumptions based on employers' lack of knowledge

Fact: All workers are different, and this includes people with disabilities.

Just because hiring a person with a disability may not have worked out for you the first time, doesn't mean it won't work out the next time. Perhaps the workplace was inaccessible, or the workplace culture was not inclusive. Disability confident leaders understand that each worker brings a novel and unique skillset to the table, whether they have a disability or not.

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Fact: Disability confidence takes time to develop. If you don't know how to talk to a person with a disability, simply ask and be open to learn.

If your worker has disclosed their disability to you, focus your conversation on how you can best support them in their role. Discuss the essential duties of the job and ask if they require any specific accommodations. Remember, they know their disability best and are the expert in the situation. Ask them for suggestions on how you can learn more about their needs or set them up for success at work. If an employee has not disclosed their disability to you, do not ask. For more information on disability disclosure, please visit Workplace Culture Tool 7 - Embedding Accessibility Into Workplace Culture and Accommodations Tool 3 - Navigating Disclosure Situations.

Fact: Workers with disabilities are subject to standard performance management processes.

While there are laws in place that serve to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities by providing equal access in the areas such as employment [Legal Briefing], there are no special procedures for managing the performance, disciplining, or parting ways with workers with disabilities. Establish clear performance expectations from the start. If a performance problem does occur, follow your company's usual guidelines: discuss the problem with the worker, look for suitable workplace accommodations, and document the situation. After attempting to manage performance, it may be necessary to discuss other options such as redeployment, a leave of absence, or dismissal. For more information, please click Performance Management Tool 7 - What To Do When Skillsets Do Not Match Job Requirements

Fact: Your clients care about diversity, equity, and inclusion. This includes disability.

Canadians with disabilities, alongside their friends and families, have access to a combined annual disposable income of over $620 billion, making this a spending group with significant clout. [9]

Assumptions based on workers' traits

Fact: Workers with disabilities have a lower absentee rate than those without disabilities.

Workers with disabilities are not absent any more than workers without disabilities. With proper workplace accommodations, individual with disabilities actually tend to have better attendance rates than their counterparts without disability across all sectors, industries, and nations. [10]

Fact: Workers with a disability bring unique skillsets to the workplace.

More often than not, the worker with a disability brings additional diversity into the workplace. For example: Someone who uses a wheelchair may point out ways to make physical access better for all by uncluttering walkways and offices. Someone who has a learning disability may develop a filing system based on colors in addition to words that increases efficiency and ease of use. Because people living with disabilities frequently have to find innovative ways to address daily barriers, they often are able to develop great problem-solving skills – skills that can give them the benefit of being creative and innovative in the workplace. [10]

Fact: Workers with disabilities are no braver, more heroic, admirable, or kind than people without disabilities. At the same time, individuals with disabilities are not more lazy, unreliable, untruthful, etc. than workers without disabilities.

Media representation and prevailing narratives of disability inaccurately represent people with disabilities. Unfortunately, these inauthentic messages tend to be listened to, and shared. People with disabilities are just like other person you employ – they are individuals with diverse backgrounds that bring individualized skillsets to your company.

[1] Ontario Human Rights Commission (2016). Policy on ableism and discrimination based on disability. https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability

[2] United Nations Geneva (2021). Disability-Inclusive Language Guidelines. https://www.ungeneva.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Disability-Inclusive-Language-Guidelines.pdf

[3] Accessible Canada Act, SC 2019, c. 10. https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/A-0.6/

[4] Morris, S., Fawcett, G., Brisebois, L., & Hughes, J. (2017). A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2018002-eng.htm

[5] Morris, S. (2017). Workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities in Canada, 2017. Government of Canada. https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.877105/publication.html

[6] Burleton, D. (2019). TD Economics: How employing more persons with disabilities could boost our economy by $50 billion. TD Stories. https://stories.td.com/ca/en/article/td-economics-how-employing-more-persons-with-disabilities-could-boost-our-economy-by-50-billion

[7] Job Accommodation Network (2020). Benefits and Costs of Accommodation. https://askjan.org/topics/costs.cfm

[8] Government of Canada (2020). 2020 Validation of Key Findings from the 2019 Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat Benchmarking Study of Workplace Accommodations in the Federal Public Service. Office of Public Service Accessibility, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat. https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/accessibility-public-service/benchmarking-study-workplace-accommodations/2019-tbs-benchmarking-study-workplace-accommodations

[9] Donovan, R. (2020). 2020 Annual Report: The Global Economics of Disability. Return on Disability Group. https://www.rod-group.com/sites/default/files/2020%20Annual%20Report%20-%20The%20Global%20Economics%20of%20Disability.pdf

[10] Lindsay, S., Cagliostro, E., Albarico, M., Mortaji, N., & Karon, L. (2018). A systematic review of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. Journal of occupational rehabilitation, 1-22.