

# Recruitment and Retention of Persons with Disabilities in British Columbia Research Project

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## *Final Research & Validation Report*

**Recruitment and Retention of Persons with Disabilities  
in British Columbia Research Project**

**FINAL RESEARCH & VALIDATION REPORT**  
Executive Summary

**Prepared by *WCG International Consultants Ltd.***

**In partnership with:**

***Human Capital Strategies***

***Sorensen & Associates***

***Spark Group***

**Prepared for the Minister's Council on Employment for Persons with Disabilities  
and the British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources**

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- Canadian Natural Resources Ltd. (Fort St. John)
- New Ports Travel (Victoria)
- North Island College
- Scotiabank (Parksville)
- Thrifty Foods (Victoria)
- Universal Printing and Binding Ltd. (North Vancouver)
- Vancouver Island Health Authority

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1. Project Goals – Research and a Practical Handbook

A consortium of consultants led by WCG International Consultants Ltd. was retained by the BC Ministry of Human Resources, in conjunction with the Minister's Council on Employment for Persons with Disabilities, to undertake a project to:

- Research, document and validate British Columbia employers' experiences, approaches, challenges and best practices with respect to recruitment and retention of employees with disabilities; and
- Create a useful tool for BC employers to recruit and or accommodate persons with disabilities and to gain visibility with other employers regarding potential employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

This report describes an extensive amount of primary and secondary research on the recruitment and retention of persons with disabilities in BC. This research provides an empirical basis for an Employer Handbook and a presentation at a major forum sponsored by the Minister's Council in Fall 2004. The project adds to a base of Canadian and international research on the topic to contribute BC-specific data and findings.

### 2. Situational Overview – A Context of Growth and Opportunity

This report provides an overview of the economic, demographic and labour market context of British Columbia, showing increased economic growth, an aging population, declining population growth and continued economic restructuring towards a service economy with growth in small business and self-employment.

The economic and labour market context includes more than one million new job openings between 2003 and 2015, with computer-related services, construction, health care, manufacturing, retail, tourism, and transportation sectors providing the largest growth opportunities. A smaller 15-24 age cohort and increasing retirements, combined with moderate inter-provincial migration, will mean a decreasing labour supply and more opportunities for employers to hire and develop persons with disabilities and other groups under-represented in the BC labour force.

In 2001, almost one in seven persons in BC had a disability, or 530,130 in total. Of this population, 290,880 persons with disabilities are of working age (15-64). In addition to other demographics of this population, this report profiles the economic and labour force status of persons with disabilities. While education levels are only marginally lower for persons without disabilities, the most recent data shows persons with disabilities are far more likely to be unemployed, under-employed or outside the labour force. Persons with disabilities in BC were 250 percent more likely to be unemployed than those without disabilities (21 percent versus six percent).

On one hand, employers are becoming increasingly concerned about where they will find the talent needed to grow their businesses. On the other hand, persons with disabilities represent a large pool of motivated, talented people in BC. Without pre-emptive action to bridge this opportunity, persons with disabilities will continue to be an under-utilized labour supply.

### **3. Research Design – Extensive Primary and Secondary Research**

The primary objective of the research project was to deliver valuable information that can be used to improve the employment of persons with disabilities in BC. It will also produce a wealth of information and material to assist the Minister's Council in fulfilling its mandate.

The secondary research involved a comprehensive literature review and analysis of existing data sources. More significantly, this project involved a robust amount of quantitative and qualitative primary research, thus adding more BC-specific data to what existed:

1. A survey of over 500 representative British Columbia employers in all major sectors and regions;
2. Interviewing 15 key informants from among knowledgeable employers, academics, government and other stakeholders;
3. Seven employer case studies; and
4. Focus groups of 47 key stakeholders in each of the five Ministry of Human Resources provincial regions, to present and validate the primary and secondary research findings.

## 4. Validated Research Findings – Empirical Evidence of Barriers

### 4.1 Employer Survey – Over 500 Employers

A survey instrument was sent to 2,850 employers with a targeted completion of at least 500 responses. A sub-sample of the employers received the long form survey with over 60 questions and the remainder received the short form survey with 26 core questions, which were a subset of the long form survey. The actual survey responses numbered 520, consisting of 224 long form completions with the remainder being short form completions.

The key findings from the employer survey are:

- **Awareness of disabilities is fairly high** - On average, 69% of respondents said that there was a high level of awareness of disabilities among their managers.
- **Majority of employers have no employees with disabilities** - Only 31% of the businesses surveyed had any employees with disabilities while over two-thirds of employers had no such employees.
- **Communication and sight impairments were identified as the greatest barriers** to work by 26% of employers, with mental health disabilities being the least cited (12%).
- Currently, **only modest efforts are being made to reduce barriers**. Few companies have disability management plans (10%) or workplace supports for persons with disabilities (22%). Some specific supports were used in more companies, such as flexible work hours (28%) and a friendly and encouraging work environment (33%).
- **Funding is the most desired form of assistance**. On the question of what assistance respondents would find helpful in hiring or retaining persons with disabilities, funding for training was the most popular response, with an average score of 27%, with funding for modifications to the workspace (26%) and an incentive/wage subsidy (25%) close behind.
- **Respondents were most likely to believe that government programs should be responsible for providing assistance** (38%), compared to 17% who believed that company programs should be responsible.
- **Companies with employees with disabilities are more aware and have better support systems**. As well, on the questions relating to support and

barrier reduction, those companies scored between 5 and 36 percentage points higher.

- **The Vancouver Island and Vancouver Coastal regions have the most workplace supports;** the Interior has the fewest. Thirty percent of respondents from the Vancouver Island region indicated that they had workplace supports, compared to 17% for respondents from the Interior. Twenty-five percent of Vancouver region respondents indicated that they had a disability management plan, compared to less than 10% for respondents from the Interior.

#### **4.2 Key Informant Interviews – 15 Stakeholder Representatives**

Fifteen key informant interviews were conducted for this project, including persons with disabilities, employer representatives, service provider and education representatives, and government representatives. Interviews were conducted by telephone with the exception of a student with a hearing impairment who responded via electronic mail and with the assistance of her father.

Most interviewees agreed that there is a greater societal awareness of persons with disabilities in the workforce. Most also believed that there was a greater awareness and acceptance of hiring persons with disabilities among employers but that this did not always translate into action or behavioural change. Employer interviewees themselves observed that some of the increased involvement with persons with disabilities was due to corporate requirements regarding federal legislation and employers' duty to accommodate.

The most important barriers or challenges identified by employer interviewees were:

- Cost of worksite accommodations, particularly physical accommodations;
- Lack of awareness or capacity to know where to start and how to recruit and support persons with disabilities;
- Fear of the unknown and fear of hiring a person with a disability;
- The challenge of hiring persons with disabilities when a company is under competitive pressure and needs new hires to “hit the ground running”; and
- Sourcing/finding persons with disabilities to actively recruit.

Other interviewees corroborated some of what the employer interviewees emphasized, but added a few key themes including: employer assumptions and misunderstandings

about persons with disabilities in the workplace; and the isolation persons with disabilities can experience in the workplace, limiting their retention.

Most employers interviewed had direct experience with workplace accommodations and costs. The larger ones recognized that many accommodations are not costly but they also pointed to examples where costs for worksite modifications were significant, but cost-effective. Other interviewees stressed that many accommodations were relatively inexpensive and that many employers do not know what is possible or available.

Employer interviewees with larger companies had significant experience with return-to-work issues. These interviewees also pointed to good examples of injured workers that have been retrained and re-employed; and a disability management interviewee cited the example of Weyerhaeuser who reduced long-term disability claim duration by 40% in 2003.

Employer interviewees offered some critical success factors including the following: treat everyone with respect; acknowledge the disability; ensure supervisors are brought into the fold; attend job forums/fairs; use affinity groups to help support each other and raise awareness; build relationships with agencies serving persons with disabilities in the community and nationally; and showcase accessibility technology.

Interviewees also suggested important factors for disability management and return to work programs: focus on the best candidate - not the disability; strong leadership support (i.e. CEO) - message that it makes good business sense; develop strong relationships with agencies serving persons with disabilities; provide resources/tool kits for managers; and demonstrate leadership from the top.

Regarding matching of persons with disabilities with appropriate employment opportunities, employer interviewees had no simple solutions in response to this question, but offered the following suggestions:

- A low level of knowledge of relevant government programs among the business sector and the need for better marketing of these programs;
- A disconnect among agencies serving persons with disabilities on what the real work culture is like, thus the need for education on the agency side in addition to education on the employer side; and
- When persons with disabilities groups approach businesses, they need to present a strong cost-benefit rationale and a good business case.

In terms of government assistance programs/services/incentives that would help employers recruit and retain persons with disabilities, employers suggested tax credits for hiring persons with disabilities, tax credits or other incentives for making a workplace more accessible, and increasing awareness among employers about existing government programs in this area. Interviewees had many good suggestions for an Employer Handbook, and provided suggestions on important reports, candidates for case studies and employer champions.

### **4.3 Case Studies – Seven Companies**

As part of the research project, the consortium has conducted a number of employer case studies. The purpose of the case studies was to identify and document successful employment or return to work situations from a variety of employers throughout the province.

Seven case studies were conducted through site visits or through telephone interviews. For some employers, a single interview was all that was required. For others, several visits were made to talk to company owners, human resources staff, managers and employees themselves.

Background information on the company was collected at the start of the interviews, followed by a number of questions around employment practices in general, the recruitment of employees with disabilities, return-to-work practices for existing employees and general advice to other employers. In addition, employers were asked to supply copies of checklists, forms, processes and other materials used to facilitate their work.

The case studies have provided some interesting information, including the following themes:

- Sourcing/finding persons with disabilities was challenging for some employers even if they wanted to hire someone with a disability;
- For smaller employers in particular, cost is a major driver;
- Familiarity with people with disabilities is a key factor in opening doors (i.e. if an employer has had some experience with people with disabilities, they are more likely to be open to hiring people with disabilities);

- Connecting with disability organizations is a good way to raise awareness for employers;
- Helping people with disabilities understand the career options open to them at an early age so that they can undergo appropriate training is important;
- Some industries rely heavily upon subcontractors and thus have no direct input into hiring or retention policies for many of their employees;
- Mental health and mental disability issues are becoming more prominent, perhaps due in part to an aging workforce and also the increased “legitimacy” and understanding around these issues; and
- Employers may find that working together with other employers or industry groups can provide them with additional expertise and support.

Also, a number of case studies themes related to disability management and return-to-work programs:

- Most employers interviewed did not have formal processes in place around recruitment or return-to-work;
- For some employers, their insurance providers are a major source of information and resources around the return-to-work and disability management processes;
- For unionized environments, involving the unions in the return-to-work process is essential as creative solutions are often required that may not be covered in collective agreements;
- Injury prevention programs are helpful in reducing disability claims and should be part of a disability management program; and
- Early intervention is a key step in successful return-to-work programs.

#### **4.4 Literature Review – Over 100 Recent Publications**

A comprehensive literature review identified the top barriers to employment for persons with disabilities, including the following:

- Negative attitudes, false assumptions, myths and misperceptions about persons with disabilities held by employers, managers and supervisors and other employees;
- A lack of awareness about persons with disabilities and available resources among employers and others;

- Lack of access to education and workplace training and adequate job skills and work experience of persons with disabilities;
- Inadequate workplace accessibility, accommodation, and employment supports for persons with disabilities; and
- A lack of widespread use of disability management and return-to-work programs.

Some of the underlying causes behind these barriers were found to be:

- Entry-level positions that are primarily outsourced to other organizations;
- A lack of job applications from people with disabilities;
- People with disabilities who do not want to self-identify;
- Those persons with disabilities who apply often do not have the qualifications sought;
- Some union resistance to innovative job accommodation measures;
- Priority being placed on other target groups (e.g. Aboriginal people);
- Workforce reduction where priority is on laid-off workers; and
- Competitive industries needing full productivity from all workers from the outset.

A review of the literature also found many critical success factors and best practices for maximizing the recruitment and retention of persons with disabilities. Additionally, several national and provincial non-profit organizations that provide persons with disabilities employment services, programs and research were identified.

#### **4.5 Validation Focus Groups – 47 Informed Stakeholders**

Focus groups were held in each of the five BC Ministry of Human Resources regions to validate the results from the project research and employer survey, as well as to provide additional information with respect to employment issues for persons with disabilities.

A total of 47 individuals participated in the focus groups. Most participants represented organizations that provide services to a range of persons with disabilities, while about 28 per cent of participants represented employers or were themselves persons with disabilities.

Two key barriers permeated discussions during the focus groups: employer attitudes and employer lack of awareness on disability issues.

Fear of persons with disabilities was identified as a key reason why employers choose not to hire persons with disabilities. Additionally, employers' lack of knowledge on disability issues emerged as a key theme in the focus groups. Employers are not sure what to expect if they hire a person with a disability, so they do not. Additionally, employers' lack knowledge on duty to accommodate issues and on how to set up a structured program in hiring persons with disabilities, according to focus group participants. As one participant put it, "small employers may not know what they do not know."

Specific training for employers about disabilities was identified throughout the focus groups as keenly important. It was noted that strategies for making it easier to recruit and retain persons with disabilities are needed more urgently by small businesses than by larger employers.

A lack of coordinated support services for both employers and persons with disabilities was identified as a key barrier to successful recruitment and retention. Focus group participants consistently stated that providing one-stop shopping (1-800 service) for information/resources for both employers and potential employees would be an excellent solution.

Focus group participants expressed that employers lack the economic resources to successfully recruit and retain persons with disabilities, and the lack of incentives for employers to do so is a major barrier. Focus group participants stated that it is essential to make the business case to employers. A cost-benefit analysis must be provided to employers to demonstrate the long-term benefit of hiring a person with a disability.

A common perception in the focus groups was that the need for today's workers to "multi-task" and juggle multiple roles presents a significant barrier to successful recruitment and retention of persons with disabilities. It was expressed in the focus groups that, in some situations, it is not simply possible for some persons with disabilities to multi-task and handle multiple roles. A common message was that flexible and appropriate jobs need to be created for persons with disabilities, with consideration given to part-time jobs, job sharing and job carving.

Focus group participants consistently expressed that awareness, promotion and advertising was a key solution to improving the recruitment and retention of persons with disabilities. A common suggestion was to create an awareness campaign around "abilities" with the goal being to educate employers and the general community to the

abilities of persons with disabilities. Using champions / model employers to raise the likelihood of other employers participating was suggested. Providing recognition/awards to showcase successful and supportive employers was also recommended. Employer networks can be used to spread the message, as having employer-to-employer messaging was perceived as a good strategy to encourage employers to buy into the concept of hiring and retaining persons with disabilities.

Focus group participants also emphasized soft skills and job readiness/pre-employment training and support for persons with disabilities as a key solution to successful recruitment and retention.

Focus group participants emphasized that while an employer handbook is needed it is only part of a solution. Participants emphasized that a handbook alone is not enough to successfully address attitudes and ignorance. Participants urged that the handbook be kept short, practical and current. It was felt that a handbook would be both a useful and symbolically important tool that would help employers enhance their efforts in the recruitment and retention of persons with disabilities.

It was also suggested that the handbook needed to include case studies of successful recruitment and retention practices. The handbook must include a list of resources for employers, and should include contacts in the community. A 1-800 line for employers to call for assistance would be very useful.

Interest must be sparked so that employers will actually use the handbook. A suggestion in this regard was that the handbook launch should include training for employers. It was emphasized that the handbook should not simply be printed and handed out. One suggestion was that service providers could distribute the handbook as part of their promotional packages.

The visual on the next page summarizes the key findings of this project, which have been confirmed by a number of research methods and validated by focus groups.

# Recruitment and Retention of Persons with Disabilities in BC

## Research Findings

### Barriers/Challenges

- Employer fear of the unknown/lack of familiarity with persons with disabilities
- Lack of awareness of the business case
- Sourcing of persons with disabilities
- Practical information on resources and tools
- Social isolation of employees with disabilities
- Workforce reduction and competitive pressures
- Insufficient employer resources and capacity
- Under-utilized worksite accommodation resources
- Expectations and labour market knowledge of persons with disabilities
- Underdeveloped relationships between employers and service providers



### Employer Needs

1. Demonstrating a strong business case
2. Financial incentives for hiring, training and accommodations
3. Access to workplace accommodation resources
4. Accessible, coordinated information and services
5. Systematic and practical disability management tools
6. Employer/executive champions and role models
7. Awareness training



### Goal

To increase the employment of persons with disabilities, particularly through partnerships with business and industry throughout BC

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations – A Menu for Action

### 5.1 Conclusions

The key conclusions arising from this project's secondary research, primary research and validation of research findings revolve around the following themes:

1. The need for attitudinal change and awareness-raising among employers;
2. The need for more effective practices among employers and managers;
3. The need for better information and coordination of services for employers;  
and
4. The need for more supports for and awareness among persons with disabilities.

#### Employer Attitudes and Awareness

- A “fear of the unknown” possessed by many employers of persons with disabilities in terms of legal risks, not understanding disabilities, not knowing how to treat persons with disabilities, etc.;
- The lack of awareness of disability issues among employers, managers/supervisors and other employees;
- Myths and perceptions about the abilities and challenges and costs of employing persons with disabilities held by employers; and
- The lack of awareness of ways to accommodate persons with disabilities in the workplace, including some simple and or cost-effective methods.

#### Employer Practices

- The need for employers and people who hire to focus on the individual and the abilities of persons with disabilities – not the disability;
- The lack of a strong business case used in promoting the employment of persons with disabilities;
- Many of the principles and effective practices for recruiting and retaining persons with disabilities are the same for individuals without disabilities – they make good business and reflect good human resource or “people” practices;
- The greater difficulty facing small business in employing persons with disabilities;
- An interest in incentives for employers hiring persons with disabilities and for funding workplace accommodations; and

- Lack of use of effective disability management and return-to-work programs, particularly among small business and non-union organizations outside primary sectors.

### Information and Coordination

- Inadequate information on and employment tools related to disability-specific barriers;
- The need to improve the matching of service providers and persons with disabilities seeking employment with employers and business and industry associations;
- The lack of adequate coordination among persons with disabilities service providers and inadequate mechanisms for interface between them and employers and industry and business groups;
- The need for a central source of information and resources to help employers recruit and retain persons with disabilities;
- The fact that an employer handbook with the appropriate content, format, etc. could be part of the solution of assisting employers to recruit and retain persons with disabilities; and that it needs to be part of a larger marketing program and awareness-building campaign; and
- The need for a “segmented” approach in providing assistance to employers who want to recruit and retain persons with disabilities in terms of providing support to small and large employers, employers in different sectors, and employers in different regions in BC.

### Persons with Disabilities

- The social isolation of employees with disabilities in the workplace and how this significantly affects retention rates;
- The lack of effective on-going workplace support for employees with disabilities;
- The need for access to relevant job skill and workplace based training for persons with disabilities; and
- The need for persons with disabilities to better understand employer expectations, working conditions and labour market realities.

In summary, all research points to the fact that persons with disabilities represent a large, growing and as yet untapped pool of talent. In *Business Case for Accessibility*, the

Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, summarized the human resource potential in this way:

“For far too many years, people with disabilities have been ignored in the marketplace. Yet this significant segment of the population is made up of many dedicated and talented people with much-needed abilities that have so far been under-utilized in the work environment. Additionally, people with disabilities consist of a group that has been neglected by the consumer market, although its purchasing power – and the secondary market that it influences – is large and growing” (Wilkerson, 2001).

The research undertaken in this project shows a clear business case for hiring persons with disabilities: an expanded talent pool for employers, employment for persons with disabilities and a growing consumer market.

- **Expanded Talent Pool**

Employers in British Columbia need skilled employees to fill positions that keep their businesses competitive in local, provincial, national and global markets. With the number of labour force entrants expected to decline, employers cannot continue to ignore any untapped pool of talent.

- **Employment for Persons with Disabilities**

Persons with disabilities continue to struggle to share in the social and economic mainstream of society. Individuals, employers and governments are all impacted by the costs that result from unacceptable unemployment rates and wasted human potential amongst persons with disabilities.

- **Growing Consumer Market**

In Canada, the spending power of persons with disabilities is now estimated to be about \$25 billion, and they also influence the spending decisions of friends and families and, in doing so, at least double their economic reach. Companies that recognize the value of reflecting the characteristics of their consumers within their workplaces will reap the benefits in productivity and sales.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this report, the researchers offer the following recommendations to the BC Ministry of Human Resources and Minister's Council on Employment for Persons with Disabilities for improving the recruitment and retention of persons with disabilities in BC.

### Recommendations to Support Employers

1. **Incentives** for employers who hire persons with disabilities, and who purchase equipment and or provide accommodations, including more financial incentives for employers through the form of tax credits – without financial incentives it is unlikely that many employers will make the extra effort.
2. There is a clear need for a **strong business case** for employers to hire persons with disabilities. A cost benefit analysis must be performed and provided to demonstrate the long-term benefit of hiring a person with a disability.
3. It is important to use **employer networks** to spread the message and to promote the concept of hiring and retaining persons with disabilities.
4. **Awareness training** for employers, managers/supervisors/employees needs to be promoted and made more readily available.
5. **One-stop shopping for information/resources** for both employers and potential employees could be an excellent solution (e.g. a common website or a 1-800 number).
6. An **awareness campaign** is needed around “abilities” with the goal being to educate employers and the general community to the abilities of persons with disabilities.
7. Stakeholders, including employers, noted a lack of communication between employers/industry groups and service providers/persons with disabilities (job seekers). In order to resolve this situation and improve the **matching of supply and demand**, government, business networks and service provider umbrella groups should become more involved in the process.

Recommendations to Support Persons with Disabilities Service Providers

1. Better **coordination of services** offered by service providers, educators and trainers and government programs directed at supporting the employment of persons with disabilities.
2. **Training is needed for employment service agencies** and organizations of persons with disabilities on business needs.

Recommendations to Support Persons with Disabilities

1. Programs that provide **pre-employment soft skills** and **job readiness/pre-employment training** and support for persons with disabilities need to be readily available.
2. A **labour market/employment resource package** could be developed for persons with disabilities to raise their awareness and readiness for new workplaces. This would be made available through service providers.
3. Persons with disabilities need greater access to **workplace based training** programs, both before and during employment.
4. Special effort is needed in **promoting workplace supports**.
5. **Flexible and appropriate jobs** need to be created for persons with disabilities, with consideration given to part-time jobs, job sharing and job carving.