

Employees' Perspectives on Intermittent Work Capacity: What Can Qualitative Research Tell Us in Ontario?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Background

People with disabilities are much more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled Canadians, for reasons directly related to their disability and beyond their control. As result, their incomes are generally much lower, and many rely on disability benefits provided through income support programs.

Yet substantial numbers of Canadians with disabilities are willing and able to work – if not full-time, then at least on an intermittent basis. Certain conditions such as multiple sclerosis, arthritis, HIV, some mental health conditions, and others have symptoms that are considered “episodic,” in which periods of good health are interrupted – often unpredictably – by periods of illness or disability that affect one’s ability to work. In other cases, people with more stable symptoms may still be able to work some of the time if provided with appropriate supports.

The Government of Canada is interested in finding ways to assist people with disabilities who can work intermittently to do so. Helping more people with disabilities stay in the labour force will help Canada deal with a predicted shortage of skilled labour, and will give people with disabilities a chance to enjoy the benefits of employment such as feeling more included in society and having improved quality of life.

Purpose and scope

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada commissioned this research to better understand why some people in Ontario with disabilities who have intermittent work capacity remain working, while others with similar disabilities become discouraged and drop out of the labour force. The goal of the project was to identify the conditions, support services, and employer practices that help people with disabilities and intermittent work capacity stay employed.

The study examines the experiences of people with disabilities who are not able to work full-time and who have some employment experience. The focus of the study is on the experiences of employees in Ontario, since other research commissioned by HRSDC is looking at employees’ experiences in other provinces and on employer perspectives.

Methodology

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) conducted this study between August 2010 and March 2011. Research activities centered on three areas:

1. Partnerships with community-based agencies in the disability sector;
2. A multidisciplinary literature review;
3. Data collection via 10 key informant interviews with experts in policy and program delivery; 10 focus groups (held in Ottawa, Toronto, North Bay, and by teleconference);

and return-to-work stories submitted electronically by people with disabilities. A total of 83 people participated – 10 as key informants, 60 in focus groups, and 13 people electronically.

Key informant interviews helped to draw the “map” of Ontario policies and programs related to employment and income supports, and focus groups explored topics such as myths and misconceptions about disability, barriers to work, disclosure of disability, accommodations in the workplace, supports to employment, and other issues.

Results

Most participants said they wanted to work and could do so, given the right supports. This includes people with episodic disabilities and more stable health conditions as well. Conditions that support employment success and longer-term attachment to the labour force include:

- A diverse, robust labour market that provides a variety of good jobs in different sectors;
- Employment that pays a decent living wage and has good health insurance and extended health benefits to cover the often high costs of treating and managing a disability;
- Fulfilling employment that doesn't exploit people with disabilities. While a few people said “survivor jobs” – low-wage, low-skilled jobs – helped them get back into the labour force, the majority saw this only as a way to find work that better matched their skills, education, and experience;;
- A workplace environment that values differences and has clear, accessible policies about how to accommodate them. Workplaces that provide support through Human Resource (HR) departments and/or labour unions regarding disclosure of disability needs and that provide appropriate accommodations to employees with disabilities as their work capacity changes;
- Employers and co-workers who understand disability and intermittent work capacity and who focus on what people can do, not their limitations. Employers who provide flexibility in how the work gets done (e.g., flexible hours, telecommuting, job redesign, etc);
- Access to personal supports (friends, family, co-workers etc.) and caring service providers/professionals;
- Access to appropriate medical and disability-related supports and services;
- Income supports that are adequate and flexible enough to allow movement in and out of employment as health permits. The majority of participants said that no matter how much they wanted to work, the unpredictability of their health meant they couldn't afford to risk losing the security of their income assistance benefits. Many saw current features of these programs – such as reducing benefits by 50 per cent of employment income – as further disincentives to employment. Many were also apparently misinformed about other features, such as being able to be paid for expenses related to volunteering and to go back onto income assistance in the event of illness;

- Access to transportation that is affordable, reliable, and accessible, and to employment-related supports to cover its costs, along with the cost of clothing, equipment, and child care, such as through benefits offered by ODSP and OntarioWorks. Many participants did not appear to know about these, however, and according to key informants, they are under-utilized;
- Employment support services that do not focus only on employment outcomes but also on other related achievements, since many people with disabilities face barriers that mean they are not “job ready” without supports. Access to a range of individualized employment supports - including pre-employment counseling and post-employment job coaching - to address the many structural barriers in the labour force for people with disabilities.

Conclusions

SRDC researchers found that, to a certain extent, recent reforms to the income support system do consider the needs of people with disabilities who can work intermittently, and help them move into employment. Key features include being able to get benefits reinstated quickly after illness, and having access to certain health benefits if an employer isn't able to offer these. However, some participants in this study were not aware of these program features, and many argued that there are still a number of built-in disincentives to employment.

In addition, some participants expressed concern about the recent shift of employment support programs in Ontario toward an outcome-based funding model, which in their opinion, has meant that many people with disabilities are not receiving the supports they need to overcome the numerous structural barriers that exist for them in the labour market. Many participants also reported that they still face stigma and discrimination in the workplace, and do not receive the accommodations they need to do their work effectively.

Based on the literature and the experiences of people involved in this study, the authors of the study's final report conclude that the likelihood of being successfully employed in the longer-term is directly related to three factors: 1) the degree of control a person has over disclosure of his or her disability, 2) whether or not s/he still has a job to return to, and 3) whether or not s/he receives appropriate accommodations in the workplace.

Key research gaps

- 1. Develop more responsive research tools:** Current data is not very clear about the numbers of people with disabilities who can work intermittently in Canada, and what their employment looks like over time. Research definitions need to take the complex and dynamic nature of disability into account, and research that explores the impact of disability on employment over time is needed.
- 2. Explore the experiences of specific sub-groups:** In order to develop effective solutions to systemic barriers to employment, it is important to understand their impact on specific sub-groups, and how they might be affected by proposed solutions. The current study only

highlighted issues for a few sub-groups of people with disabilities and intermittent work capacity, such as women, Francophones, people from racialized communities, and people living in the North. These issues should be explored in more depth and with other groups of people such as men and Aboriginal people to develop a fuller understanding of their experiences and how they might be affected by possible interventions.

- 3. Test promising practices and innovations:** Whether in the area of income or employment supports, innovations and promising practice should be appropriately evaluated to ensure long-term effectiveness in scaled-up versions. The effectiveness of work-related benefits as incentives to employment should be evaluated, and new models could be tested, such as the milestones approach to employment supports used in British Columbia.