

Project Insights Report

Supporting Mid-Career Workers with Disabilities



PARTNERS

Ontario Tech University
3+ Economic Development Corporation



LOCATIONS

Ontario



INVESTMENT

647,855



PUBLISHED

July 2025

Executive Summary

Despite the fact that labour shortages persist across a number of Canadian sectors and employers struggle to fill positions, hundreds of thousands of persons living with disabilities—visible and non-visible—who can work are either underemployed or unemployed.

This project, Supporting Mid-Career Workers with Disabilities, focused on addressing the employment barriers that persons with disabilities, particularly those aged 35 to 49, face in Canada. While these mid-career workers have valuable knowledge and experience, they often encounter discrimination and do not have access to proper workplace accommodations, which impedes their career advancement and integration into the workforce.

The research adopted a comprehensive, multi-phased approach involving collaboration among researchers, non-governmental organizations supporting individuals with disabilities, and employers. The project encompassed four elements: a secondary analysis of the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability, a scoping review, a nationwide survey of mid-career workers with disabilities, and qualitative focus groups involving employers and service agencies.

The findings underscored that society has a misinformed tendency to view employees with disabilities as a monolithic group. The insights gained from this study highlight the need for dynamic and inclusive employment practices and policies that address the unique challenges faced by mid-career workers with disabilities. Moreover, solutions must enable tailoring at the group and individual levels and centre persons living with disabilities as the drivers who determine what they need to thrive in the labour market.

One of the key outcomes of the project was the development of WorkAble.ca, an innovative platform designed to support these workers. The website is a scalable online community platform designed to provide resources and educational opportunities for persons with disabilities, support connections among individuals with disabilities, support employers through resource sharing, and provide opportunities for employers and persons with disabilities to connect.

The ongoing development and expansion of WorkAble.ca, along with continued research into sector-specific barriers, are set to further enhance the career adaptability and employment outcomes for these workers. This marks a meaningful stride toward fostering economic prosperity and inclusivity in Canada.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** The gap in employment rates between mid-career workers with disabilities aged 35 to 49 and those living without disabilities is 19 percentage points (65.8% vs. 85.2%).
- 2** A significant number of mid-career workers with disabilities require workplace accommodations (34.7%) and many report discrimination in employment-related scenarios such as job interviews, job offers and promotions, which affect their career advancement opportunities.
- 3** The project's findings highlight the need for 1) tailored employment policies and practices to improve labour market outcomes, and 2) mid-career workers with disabilities to be the drivers of policy and program changes to address both individual and structural barriers.

The Issue

In Canada, individuals with disabilities encounter notable employment challenges, which are evidenced by the high rates of underemployment and unemployment among mid-career workers with disabilities (MCWD) aged 35 to 49. Despite having work experience, these individuals often find it difficult to secure appropriate employment. In 2017, the employment rate among MCWD was 19 percent lower than the employment rate of those living without disabilities (66% vs. 85%). At the same time, many employers continue to face challenges recruiting talent.

The Canadian employment landscape for workers with disabilities has long been riddled with challenges such as discrimination, inadequate workplace accommodations and a lack of supportive policies. These issues are even more pronounced for MCWD who struggle with career progression and adapting to a rapidly evolving job market. As a result, there is a growing need for accessible employment and barrier-free workplaces to support MCWD.

Past efforts to tackle these challenges have often been fragmented and not adequately tailored to the unique needs of MCWD, underscoring the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses individual and systemic employment barriers.



What We Investigated

The research project explored the career needs and adaptability of workers with disabilities, focusing on mid-career workers in Canada aged 35 to 49. This group forms a notable segment of the population of persons with disabilities that are either engaged in or aspiring to join the workforce. The study aimed to identify their specific needs and experiences and to develop supportive tools and resources to aid their integration into the labour market.

Key stakeholders involved in this comprehensive study included University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Nipissing University, York University, Durham College, and notable advocacy organizations such as the National Educational Association of Disabled Students and the Council of Canadians with Disabilities. These institutions collaborated to gather and analyze data, develop resources and disseminate findings. The project ran from July 2019 to December 2023.

Overall, the project aimed to gain knowledge and test strategies to facilitate community building and support the career progression of MCWD. To do this, the project conducted four sub-research initiatives.

- **Secondary Analysis:** The team conducted a secondary analysis of the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability to better understand the demographic characteristics and labour market experiences of MCWD. This involved detailed data analysis to identify trends and specific needs.
- **Scoping Review:** A scoping review was carried out to examine existing literature on the employment experiences and challenges faced by MCWD.
- **MCWD Employment Experience Survey:** The insights from secondary analysis and scoping review informed the development of a national survey to gather primary data on current and past

employment experiences, perceptions, needs and adaptive responses to employment, as well as ongoing learning and career progression.

- **Focus-Group Interviews:** Focus-group interviews were conducted to delve deeper into the themes that emerged from the survey. These discussions included MCWD, employers and advocates, providing a rich, qualitative understanding of the issues.

Findings from the research were used to launch WorkAbly.ca, an online portal providing crucial resources for mid-career workers with disabilities.

What We're Learning

Findings from the research provided key insights into the current challenges, needs and opportunities for MCWD.

Secondary Analysis of the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability

The secondary analysis of the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability outlined that among 6.2 million people with disabilities aged 15 years and older, approximately 1.2 million identified as mid-career workers (aged 35–49 years old). The analysis outlined key demographic information about the population of mid-career workers with disabilities and highlighted differences among mid-career workers with and without disabilities. For instance, MCWD face lower levels of education and are less likely to be employed. As the severity of disability increases, the probability of employment decreases significantly.

Scoping Review

The project's scoping review highlighted a number of themes that impact the transition and adaptation to the workplace for MCWD. These include health and disability challenges in the workplace, workplace accommodation and support systems, socio-physiological factors affecting return to work, socioeconomic factors and insurance policies, systemic and organizational influences, economic and social consequences of work-related challenges, and policy implications and research prospects. The themes highlight the need for comprehensive strategies that meet the unique needs of mid-career workers while taking into account the wider systemic context for successful job transitions and reintegration.

MCWD Employment Experiences Survey

Researchers collected 184 responses to the employment experiences survey, which highlighted that discrimination and inadequate support and workplace adjustments were prevalent barriers impacting career advancement among these individuals.

The survey respondents most often reported mental health and mobility-related disabilities. Respondent reported difficulty in changing jobs or advancing their careers, most often due to discrimination or limited support and accommodations. Additionally, respondents reported that their disabilities or conditions made it difficult to find work either presently or in the past.

Focus-Group Interviews

The focus-group interviews underscored the ongoing need for employer education about disability support and the advantages of inclusive hiring. These discussions also stressed the value of personalized accommodations and the potential for systemic changes to improve employment outcomes for workers with disabilities.

WorkAble Online Portal

The WorkAble.ca portal was successfully launched, providing a crucial resource for mid-career workers with disabilities. More than a showcase of these research products, WorkAble.ca is a scalable online community platform designed with:

- features that provide resources and educational opportunities for persons with disabilities (i.e., resource library, podcast and webinars, and learning tools);
- support connections among individuals with disabilities (i.e., peer-to-peer support program and discussion forums);
- support employers through resource sharing (i.e., tools for building inclusive workplaces);
- provide opportunities for employers and persons with disabilities to connect (and post jobs and other opportunities).

★ **Why It Matters**

The findings from the project showcase the need for dynamic and inclusive employment practices and policies that address the unique challenges faced by workers with disabilities. It is crucial for effective accommodations and informed support systems to be available for workers with disabilities to be successful in the workforce. These are pivotal in enabling workers with disabilities to not only secure employment but also to thrive within their roles. As a result, policymakers need to develop standardized practices to better support workers with disabilities, such as employer training, disability awareness and accommodation requirements. Additionally, the development and widespread dissemination of career adaptability resources and tools can equip workers with disabilities with the necessary skills and confidence to navigate the labour market effectively.

The findings also highlight the importance of user-centric designs when developing programs and policies. Persons with disabilities should play an integrated and participatory role in policy and program design. Such an inclusive approach aligns with principles of social justice and equity and leads to improved program effectiveness and better labour market outcomes.



State of Skills: Better Labour Market Transitions for Mid-Career Workers

Supporting displaced mid-career workers requires a clear understanding of the barriers and difficulties they face, and it should also seek to build on highly valued skills developed through years of work and life experience.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

► What's Next

Continue to enhance and expand the features of WorkAble.ca, focusing on increasing user engagement and adding more resources. This includes launching the peer-to-peer support program and user-moderated discussion forums, which are slated to begin soon. Monitoring and evaluating user feedback will be crucial for ongoing improvements and to ensure the platform meets the needs of MCWD effectively.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

Tobin.S (2025). Project Insights Report: Supporting Mid-Career Workers with Disabilities, Ontario Tech University. Toronto: Future Skills Centre. <https://fsc-ccf.ca/research/mid-career-disabilities/>

Funded by the
Government of Canada's
Future Skills Program



Supporting Mid-Career Workers with Disabilities is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

© Copyright 2025 – Future Skills Centre / Centre des Compétences futures