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Project Insights Report

Piloting Accessibility Diversity Assessment Tool: Supporting Employees with Disabilities in SMEs



PARTNERS

Diversity Institute



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



PUBLISHED

June 2026

☰ Executive Summary

Persons with disabilities represent a growing proportion of Canada's population, yet they continue to experience persistent barriers to employment. Governments and organizations have introduced programs, initiatives, and strategies to support Canadians with disabilities on pathways to employment; however, gaps remain in the implementation of these practices, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often lack the resources, tools, and dedicated human resources (HR) staff to implement these efforts.

This report highlights the latest evidence on the barriers experienced by persons with disabilities in the workplace, as well as examples of tools and best practices to help SMEs integrate equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), accessibility, and disability inclusion into their organizational strategies, policies, and practices. However, a desk review found that, although many tools can help organizations advance disability inclusion in the workplace, many are costly, complex, or not tailored to SMEs.

The pilot Accessibility Diversity Assessment Tool (DAT) add-on, developed by the Diversity Institute in partnership with the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, intended to address these gaps by offering SMEs a practical and easy-to-use solution. The pilot Accessibility DAT add-on helps SMEs evaluate their accessibility policies and practices, identify successes and areas for improvement, and provides customized recommendations and best practices to support accessibility and disability inclusion efforts. Preliminary consultations with organizations found that the tool was easy to understand and navigate, as well as accurately assess accessibility efforts within organizations.

The findings underscore that SMEs are well-positioned to be key contributors to fostering accessibility and disability inclusion in the workplace, but they need practical tools and resources to advance EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion. The pilot Accessibility DAT add-on can help drive meaningful change while also laying the groundwork for other use cases, such as Truth and Reconciliation, to support Indigenous People.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Accessibility and disability inclusion require tailored approaches, and no one-size-fits-all solution exists, as disabilities manifest from visible to invisible and experiences differ across age, gender, race, and immigration status.
- 2 Preliminary feedback on the pilot Accessibility DAT Add-on is positive – 90% of the 10 organizations that tested the Add-on reported that it was easy to navigate.
- 3 The pilot Accessibility DAT Add-on continues to be updated to ensure support for SMEs in their accessibility and disability inclusion efforts, while the developers are exploring additional use cases to help address inequalities across equity-deserving groups in the workplace.

▶ The Issue

The prevalence of disability in Canada continues to increase. As of 2022, 27% of Canadians aged 15 years and older (nearly 8 million people) had one or more disabilities – up from 22% in 2017. Youth, women, and seniors have higher disability rates.

For example, women are more likely than men to have a disability (35% vs 24%) and Indigenous Peoples and racialized people also have higher rates of disability.

At the same time, Canada is experiencing an aging population combined with decreased birth rates and longer life expectancy, which has placed a greater emphasis on increased labour productivity and labour force participation by equity-deserving groups. Many government programs and organizational policies are intended to support persons with disabilities in the labour market. In spite of these efforts, persons with disabilities continue to face persistent disparities in employment and economic outcomes. For example, in 2022, the unemployment rate remained higher among persons with disabilities than those without disabilities (7.6% vs. 4.6%). Barriers also persist across the employment lifecycle, such as discrimination, ableism, fears of disclosing disability status, and misconceptions about the cost of accommodations.

Various tools, playbooks, and self-assessments on EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion exist. However, many tools target larger organizations and are built on assumptions that organizations have the resources to develop and implement policies, or do not offer clear, actionable steps to guide operational changes. SMEs, which comprise over 99% of employer businesses in Canada, are thus left behind. To address this gap, the pilot Accessibility DAT Add-on was developed to provide an easy-to-use application and offer tailored and actionable recommendations to advance EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion for SMEs.



What We Investigated

This research explores the prevalence and employment barriers for persons with disabilities, as well as the role of SMEs in creating accessible and inclusive spaces for persons with disabilities. It was guided by the following research questions:

- What employment barriers prevent persons with disabilities from fully and meaningfully participating in the labour market?
- What challenges do SMEs face when developing, implementing, and monitoring EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion strategies?
- What EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion assessment tools and resources are available to support Canadian SMEs and larger organizations?
- How does the pilot Accessibility DAT add-on help SMEs improve EDI and accessibility strategies?
- What promising practices can help organizations advance EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion in Canada?

The report leveraged the latest data from industry reports, scholarly articles, Statistics Canada, and publicly available EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion assessment tools to provide a snapshot of the barriers faced by persons with disabilities in the labour market and the strategic challenges organizations face when adopting EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion efforts. It also introduces the pilot Accessibility DAT Add-on and industry best practices as a solution to help SMEs understand their current EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion and carve a way forward.

✔ What We're Learning

Accessibility and disability inclusion require tailored approaches, and *no* one-size-fits-all solutions exist. Disabilities vary from visible to invisible, and experiences differ across age, gender, race, and immigration status. For example, the [prevalence of disability among youth is increasing](#), rising from 13% in 2017 to 20.1% in 2022, and disability rates differ across equity-deserving groups, for instance, [29.8% of non-immigrants reported a disability compared to 21.5% of recent immigrants in 2022](#)).

SMEs are well-positioned to be [key contributors to fostering accessibility and disability inclusion in the workplace](#), particularly compared to larger organizations, as they typically have smaller teams, utilize accessible contracting processes, and offer a more personalized approach. However, research shows obstacles and misconceptions about accessibility and disability inclusion in the workplace. For example, SMEs are often concerned about the [perceived costs of implementing workplace accommodations](#), but research shows that workplace accommodations, such as flexible work arrangements, are generally [low-cost](#).

The most valuable tools to help SMEs advance accessibility and disability inclusion are practical resources for creating inclusive and accessible workplaces, as well as fostering meaningful connections with community organizations. However, a desk review of tools, playbooks, and consulting services revealed that tools serve various purposes and target different audiences. These findings reinforce the need for a practical solution to help SMEs advance accessibility and disability inclusion, and the pilot Accessibility DAT add-on bridges this gap by providing SMEs with a practical tool to assess their organizational strategies.

Results from preliminary consultations with organizations on the usability of the pilot Accessibility DAT Add-on revealed that the tool was easy to understand and navigate, and also uncovered the challenges organizations faced in advancing accessibility. For example, 90% reported that the add-on helped uncover gaps and challenges that their organizations were facing in advancing accessibility. We also found several promising practices to help guide organizations – for example, the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work's [comprehensive toolkit](#) and [a Seat at the Table](#), a project that encourages organizations to appoint people with disabilities to their Boards, which can be used to help SMEs advance their accessibility and disability inclusion efforts.

★ Why It Matters

Research consistently shows that organizations that adopt EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion strategies benefit from increased revenue, profit, and productivity, as well as decreased turnover and increased market share. Despite this, persons with disabilities remain an untapped talent pool in Canada, experiencing disparities in labour market participation, unemployment, and underemployment. Although there are efforts to support persons with disabilities, tools and playbooks vary considerably. Practical resources and tools can help SMEs in advancing their efforts to create an accessible and inclusive workspace.

The pilot Accessibility DAT Add-on is an example of a practical and easy-to-use tool that allows SMEs to evaluate and advance EDI, accessibility, and disability inclusion, as well as identify successes and areas for improvement, and receive customized recommendations and best practices. These policies, programs, and initiatives not only help address inequities within organizations but also drive change, build accessible and disability-inclusive environments, and promote inclusive organizational cultures.



State of Skills: Quality of Work

Improving quality of work, through better wages and benefits, social environments, security, safety, and inclusion, alongside skills and professional development is one part of a larger strategy to address these labour shortages.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

► **What's Next**

The Diversity Institute aims to further improve the functionality and usability of the pilot Accessibility DAT Add-on and expand industry-specific best practices available to organizations. As the next step, the DI intends to develop additional use cases, including those for municipalities and nonprofits. In 2026, the Truth and Reconciliation Add-on will be introduced to help SMEs not only address inequities for Indigenous Peoples within organizations but also support inclusive organizational practices.

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

Diversity Institute. (2026) Project Insights Report: Piloting Accessibility Diversity Assessment Tool: Supporting Employees with Disabilities in SMEs. Toronto: Future Skills Centre.
<https://fsc-ccf.ca/research/pilot-assessment-tool/>

Funded by the
Government of Canada's
Future Skills Program



Piloting Accessibility Diversity Assessment Tool: Supporting Employees with Disabilities in SMEs 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.

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