



# *Job Retention and Career Progression for Persons with Disabilities*

## *Literature Review of Canadian and International Sources*

March 2009 – August 2009

### **Background**

People with disabilities have made great progress in labour participation in Canada during the economic growth of the late nineties and early 2000's. However, they continue to have higher rates of unemployment and lower average incomes. Many exogenous economic circumstances impact job retention and career progression for people with disabilities. For example, certain industries and occupations have higher turnover rates, lower job retention, and less opportunity for career mobility. Unfortunately, more people with disabilities tend to be clustered in low-paid, non-skilled employment sectors than those without disabilities. Coincidental with these traits are lower average periods at a job and/or slower rates of career progression.

### **Introduction**

The impetus for this work beginning March 2009 was Human Resources and Skills Development Canada's (HRSDC) Request for Proposals entitled "Literature review and conceptual paper on measuring inter-relationships between disability and job retention, career progress".

The final product is a document outlining the relevant literature and to propose a framework and methodology to better understand the inter-relationships between disability and job retention/career progression. This work supplements the very small amount of research that has been

done that focuses on the career paths of persons with disabilities.

### **Project Methodology/ Activities**

The methodology included a combination of thematic review and Meta-Analysis of the literature. Several electronic databases were reviewed, including CBCA Business, Sage Journal Online, Taylor & Francis Journals Online, Academic Search Elite, Gladnet, and EBSCO Host. A manual search of the following journals based on our knowledge of the literature and anticipated sources of research in this field included Disability & Society, Disability Studies Quarterly, and Review of Disability Studies Journal. In addition, the research conducted through the following community-based research organizations was reviewed: Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, National Institute on Disability Management and Research, and Roeher Institute.

Scholarly papers including any combination of the following key words within their titles or abstracts will be reviewed: disability, handicap, illness, impairment, and employment, job retention, career advancement, career progression, promotion, employee turnover.

### **Results**

The literature documents that several socio-demographic characteristics that impact job retention and career progression. For example, age, gender, marital status and level of education are clearly indicated as

---

important factors for all Canadians, both with and without disabilities. Important issues for those with disabilities include type of impairment, severity of disability (with the most severe less able to retain employment and achieve career progression), and the point of onset (resulting in different employment outcomes for those with congenital vs. acquired disabilities, those who experience sudden onset vs. those whose disability manifests over time).

Another key theme that emerged from the literature included characteristics of the workplace itself as an indicator of job retention and career progression. For example, larger organizations are more likely to demonstrate better employment results for people with disabilities. Issues of “corporate culture”, employer/co-worker attitudes, and discrimination/harassment are all indicated as important factors related to job retention and career progression. Generally speaking, an organization requiring long periods of overtime and/or short notice or non-flexible work arrangements lead to barriers for people with disabilities. The importance of approachable and understanding employers and co-workers can not be overstated, as this impacts the ability of an employee with disabilities to ask for job-related accommodations.

The final theme that emerged in the literature was that of the individual and employment. This included such issues as an employee’s commitment and job satisfaction to the organization as a predictor of job retention, as well as an individual’s perception of their own abilities to perform well and belong in the workplace.

## **Conclusions**

Job retention and turnover rates are a focus of much research, the general consensus being that “Staff turnover is costly; it reduces the effectiveness and productivity of an organization ... (Saratoga Institute & Kepner-Trogoe 1999, HayGroup 2001),” quoted in Ellenbecker (2004) p.303. Therefore, much of the focus in the literature has been on determining what causes turnover and how to stall it. Job retention is a key factor for employers, who “...recognized that it was in their own interests to keep disabled workers in their employment, to demonstrate social responsibility, out of loyalty to their employees, to reduce insurance costs and loss of productivity, and to avoid losing valued workers.” (Vocational Rehabilitation Branch 1998)

People with disabilities have made great progress in labour participation in Canada during the economic growth of the late nineties and early 2000’s. However, they continue to have higher rates of unemployment, lower incomes on average, and to be clustered in low-paid, non-skilled employment sectors than those without disabilities. Coincidental with these traits are lower average periods at a job and/or slower rates of career progression. There is a need to examine the relationships between labour market dynamics and job retention/career progression for people with disability. For example, during the boom leading up to the recent economic downturns was a time of unprecedented growth in the proportion of working-age people with disabilities working, how long they were able to stay at work and the ability of many to progress to professional

---

and semi-professional high paying employment. Future research will be needed to determine if new employment opportunities available to people with disabilities reflects a systemic change in the way they are perceived as potential employees, or if they were being called upon because of labour shortages-- if they were indeed part of a 'reserve labour force'. If the latter is the case, people with disabilities may disproportionately be cast out of employment as the economy shrinks.

Other questions remain unanswered as well. For example, what have been the influences of policy (Employment Equity, Human Rights Legislation, focus of 'return to work' within income support programs) and new human resources practices (Disability Management) on job retention and career progression? Is there a place within current or potential Employment Equity Legislation for job retention and career progression? How would measuring/evaluating these influence behaviour within organizations, and thus should these measurements be integral to Employment Equity strategies? What other Legislation could positively impact job retention and career progression? Is there a difference between the personality factors that influence job retention/career progression of people with disabilities as opposed to those without disabilities? Are those people who acquire disabilities at an advanced age choosing retirement or being forced into early retirement?

This literature review has opened the door to more questions and possible research

on the topic of job retention and career progression for people with disabilities in the future.

For more information visit  
CCDS' website at:  
**[www.disabilitystudies.ca](http://www.disabilitystudies.ca)**

#### **Project Team**

Janalee Morris-Wales  
Laura Rempel

#### **Funder**

Social Research Division (SRD) of the Policy Research Directorate (PRD) of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC)



Government  
of Canada

Gouvernement  
du Canada

#### **Disclaimer**

The views expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada or of the Federal government.