

# Employment of Persons with Disabilities: Now is the time to put it on your agenda!

A remarkable number of persons with disabilities remain unemployed despite their willingness and ability to work. **Winston Leckie** looks for opportunities for change and articulates why now is a good time to re-think the issue.

LITTLE GOOD NEWS EXISTS about the current state of employment for persons with disabilities. Without entering into the debate about the definition of disability or quibbling over the decimal points on the statistics, let's look at some of the indicators of the how things are—and then look for opportunities to rethink the traditional exclusion of people with disabilities from employment.

The latest *Employment Equity Act of 2004* states “At 2.3%, the representation of persons with disabilities in the workforce under the Act in 2003 continued a declining trend that started in 1996, when representation of this group stood at 2.7%.” *The Recruitment and Retention of Persons with Disabilities in British Columbia Research Report* stated “Persons with disabilities in B.C. were 250 percent more likely to be unemployed than those without disabilities.”

In the United States, the employment rate for persons with disabilities has declined by 2%

since the Americans with Disabilities Act was put into effect in 1992. In B.C., the most generous estimates indicate that 56% of British Columbians with disabilities are unemployed, a number in stark contrast to the overall Canadian and B.C. unemployment rates of 6.4% and 4.8%, respectively.

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Taking a step back, why is it so important to people that they have a job? While many espouse economic independence and security as the primary reasons for employment—and there is indeed merit in that—another perspective exists: the cost of being unemployed. When a

group of researchers investigating human happiness at the University of British Columbia asked people to assign either positive or negative income-equivalent dollar values to life events the response was dramatic. Having a job that makes good use of your skills was worth a positive \$70,000, while being unemployed rated a negative \$200,000.

Now is a good time to re-think the exclusion of people with disabilities from the work force. A number of current factors exist that could provide, with the right effort, significant employment opportunities:

- **Skill shortage:** From the skilled trades, to the hospitality and tourism, to management, it does not seem to matter: experts predict a skill shortage.
- **Aging workforce:** An aging work force and declining birth rate means insufficient capacity to fill “replacement” jobs, let alone the needs of an expanding economy.
- **Strong economy:** The economy appears robust and fuelled by major development activities. Forty-five percent of employers expect to hire within the next three months. Where will those new employees come from?
- **Low unemployment:** As previously mentioned, B.C.’s unemployment rate of 4.8% leaves an increasingly smaller labour pool to address the factors above without increasing the number of entrants to the labour market.

Combine the above with an increasing awareness that the cost of accommodation should not be seen as a barrier. The BC Chamber of Commerce report *Closing the Skills Gap* found “90% of those with disabilities who are under 35 have ‘mild to moderate’ conditions [and] fewer than 20% require any accommodation in the work place.” The majority of workplace accommodations cost less than \$500 and makes the workplace better for not only other employees, but customers and clients as well.

However, in the Conference Board of Canada report *Tapping the Talents of Persons with Disabilities*, 80% of respondents indicated that strategic direction from top management was important; however, only 40% felt they had sufficient resources to be effective.

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The labour market has to address why people with disabilities have not played an equitable part in labour force development. What’s missing is commitment, resources, and accountability at all levels of the development process. Commitment in specific terms of where employers want to be rather than how they want to be perceived. You do not see adequate levels of government support, training programs, or public education. Nor do you see employers saying things like “we will increase the representation of people with disabilities in the workforce by 2% every year.” Resources need to be allocated to achieve the goals—not simply resources for job placement, but for training and disability supports, so as to provide a continuum of capacity. Accountability structures and consequences need to be put in place to ensure goals are achieved.

Now is the time of opportunity. We need to put employment of persons with disabilities on everyone’s agenda—if we do not, everyone’s glass will remain half full. ■