



HIRING, TRAINING AND RETAINING APPRENTICES WITH DISABILITIES: A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS

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APPRENTICESHIP
FORUM



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Ontario



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About CAF-FCA

CAF-FCA is an inclusive organization working with the apprenticeship community in all regions of Canada. It promotes apprenticeship as a valuable form of post-secondary education that leads to rewarding careers in high-demand occupations. CAF-FCA has representatives from business, labour, educators, equity-seeking groups and the jurisdictions.

Many thanks to the Project Advisory Committee, interviewees and focus group participants for providing valuable input. Organizations that support persons with disabilities and those with lived experience contributed to the creation of this document.

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A blue-tinted photograph of two men in a workshop setting. The man on the left is wearing a hoodie and has his hands clasped, looking towards the man on the right. The man on the right is seen in profile, looking back at the first man. The background shows a blurred workshop environment with a table and chairs.

Introduction

This guide is for employers interested in supporting apprentices at their worksites, including those who may have visible and invisible disabilities. In this guide you will learn about:

1. apprentice recruitment and retention promising practices
2. available supports and resources for employers, like yourself, and also for apprentices
3. relevant terms and legislative requirements.

The information in this guide is based upon insights from 25 representatives from national or provincial organizations that support persons with disabilities and those with lived experience.

Although the focus of this guide is on employers in Ontario, national resources can be used by employers across the country.

The Business Case for Employers

There is a strong business case for hiring apprentices. Canada will need 220,000 additional journeypersons over the next five years to alleviate current labour supply challenges and to meet future demands. With over 132,000 journeypersons set to retire, apprentices are no longer a “nice to have” but urgent and necessary for maintaining a skilled trades workforce.¹ Employer champions say there are many benefits to training apprentices who, after their training, will become certified journeypersons. Apprenticeship training benefits the workplace in these ways:

- ✓ Creates a talent pipeline
- ✓ Produces highly skilled trades professionals
- ✓ Increases productivity and workplace safety
- ✓ Avoids skills shortages
- ✓ Renews and rejuvenates journeyperson mentors
- ✓ Generates financial benefits²

Research indicates that employees with disabilities can strengthen business performance in these ways:

- ✓ Improves interactions amongst co-workers
- ✓ Boosts company morale
- ✓ Increases customer base
- ✓ Enhances retention³

According to a 2018 study by the University of British Columbia, employees with disabilities not only performed as well or better than average on productivity, they also had a 93% retention rate.⁴ The 2018 Disability Inclusion Advantage report found that persons with disabilities have desirable attributes that are sought by employers. For example, persons with disabilities have developed strong problem-solving capabilities and persistence because they need to be creative in order to adapt to the world around them.⁵ The same report also found that companies that embraced inclusion became more profitable in the long run, with 28% higher revenues and a 30% higher profit margin.⁶ Accommodations benefit not only the employee with the disability, but the workplace as a whole. Flexibility in work tasks, enhanced health and safety measures, and greater accessibility lead to:

- ✓ Higher productivity
- ✓ Reduced absenteeism
- ✓ Improved morale⁷

Getting Started

There are three key steps to getting started:

Step 1 - Educate Yourself

Did you know that 27% of Canadians identify as having disabilities and 80% of these disabilities are invisible? ⁸ Learning about different types of disabilities, legislative requirements, accommodations and disclosure will increase your level of awareness. It will also encourage you to reflect upon whether your workplace is ready to hire, train and retain apprentices with disabilities.

Did you know that 27% of Canadians identify as having disabilities and 80% of these disabilities are invisible?⁹

Step 2 - Seek Advice

Seeking advice from organizations that support apprentices with disabilities and that already know what works will save you time and energy. You can get sample policies and checklists from the Government of Ontario and from organizations such as Workplace Safety and Prevention Services. Workplace assessments and training for your team are available from organizations such as Ontario Disability Employment Network, INNOVA and the Canadian Mental Health Association. After you have the appropriate policies and processes in place, your focus needs to be on tangible and concrete action items that will enact lasting change at your workplace.

It is possible to obtain accommodations for apprentices that need them. Apprenticeship authorities in each province and territory and the colleges and unions, where apprentices go for technical training, will offer apprentices accommodations. You can reach out to your local apprenticeship office and find out what the requirements are for obtaining accommodations.

Step 3 - Hire, Train and Retain

Once your workplace is prepared to hire apprentices with disabilities, services such as Abilities to Work, My Job Match, Job Ability Canada, Career Services, Canadian Association for Supported Employment, and Inclusion Canada can help you recruit candidates and develop on-the-job accommodation solutions. Often minor adjustments to existing workplace processes or assistive learning devices will ensure apprentices with disabilities will be safe and productive. Accommodations can be subsidized by organizations that support persons with disabilities or paid for directly by the employer. Ongoing communication with the local apprenticeship office, college or union about your apprentices' needs will help all parties proactively address any issues that may arise.

Figure 1: Three Key Steps to Getting Started



Step 1: Educate Yourself

What does the word disability mean?

There are many different types of disabilities which can be visible or invisible. The apprentice population in general tends to be in the 18 to 30 age range. The most common disabilities among this population are invisible disabilities such as learning or mental health disabilities.¹⁰

In the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) “persons with disabilities” is defined as meaning “people who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”¹¹

The Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work’s Disability Confidence Kit will help you become more informed about different types of disabilities and the various barriers that persons with disabilities experience.¹² You can learn about persons with disabilities and their legal and human rights by exploring a portal created and maintained by the National Educational Association of Disabled Students.¹³

What is the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), 2005?

The AODA is legislation in Ontario that mandates the standards that organizations must follow in order to become further accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities. The AODA requires employers in Ontario to develop, implement and enforce accessibility plans to render services, programs, spaces and employment accessible.¹⁴ The accessibility standards cover five key areas:

1. Information and communication standards
2. Employment standards
3. Transportation standards
4. Design of public spaces standards (Accessibility Standards for the Built Environment)
5. Customer Service Standards

A person or organization (depending on its size) must file accessibility reports to monitor their progress regarding their attainment of these accessibility standards.¹⁵

What does the word accommodations mean?

Accommodations is the name given to the steps that are taken to reduce or remove barriers imposed upon disabled employees. The goal is to facilitate active and meaningful participation within the workspace, allowing employees with disabilities to perform job functions efficiently and safely.¹⁶ Accommodations may include workplace modifications. They may also be about creating a welcoming social and work environment that accounts for inclusion and diversity, including disability.¹⁷ Under the Ontario Human Rights Code and the AODA, employers are required to accommodate employees with disabilities throughout the hiring process and the entirety of their employment.¹⁸

Did you know?

Workplace accommodations are not as expensive as many employers might believe. A 2016 CIBC online survey found that 30% of Canadians with disabilities do not require any workplace accommodation. The average cost of accommodation for those who do? Less than \$500.¹⁹

Apprentice Accommodations

The most common accommodations for apprentices include:

- tutoring
- extra time on examinations
- e-reader
- assistive learning devices
- adjustments to processes
- modification of work stations or vehicles
- customized safety equipment (e.g., gloves)
- assistive devices for lifting
- wireless devices to enhance communication
- audio module software
- ramps.

Each apprenticeship authority will have its own requirements for accommodations at technical training or the certification examination. Sometimes an assessment is required in order to receive accommodations. This is why you should check with your local apprenticeship office if you are seeking accommodations for your apprentice.²⁰

What does the word disclosure mean?

Disclosure is the process where an individual informs their workplace of their chronic illness, disability, and/or mental health condition. A disclosure occurs to request accommodations so that individuals can actively and meaningfully participate within their workspace, in ways that respond best to their diverse needs.²¹ Disclosure is voluntary and individuals have a right to privacy.

How do you know if your company is ready to hire an apprentice with a disability?

Before hiring apprentices, set yourself up for success and assess your own workplace environment by asking yourself these questions:

1. Have you familiarized yourself and your team with national or provincial/territorial disability requirements so you can fulfill your obligations?
2. Do you have workplace accessibility and accommodations policies?
3. Do your staff require training to increase their level of awareness?
4. Are you connected to local partners such as organizations that support persons with disabilities?

Figure 2: Preparing Your Workplace



Ontario Disability Employment Network

Ontario Disability Employment Network increases employer capacity to hire, train and retain persons with disabilities. Staff help employers understand the business case and assist with onboarding, recruitment, retention, and compliance with AODA. Biz Connect for Employers and Employment Service Providers helps employers get connected to organizations in their local communities.

What are the provincial requirements in Ontario?

The accessibility requirements you need to follow depend on the type and size of your organization. There are resources available to help you from the Government of Ontario.

Self-Assessment

Perform a self-assessment of your company using the [Government of Ontario's Accessibility Standards Checklist](#).

Learn About Training Requirements

Access [free AccessForward education modules](#) to meet the training requirements under Ontario's accessibility laws and other accessibility needs.

Training Your Staff

Gain insights on how to train your staff in accordance with accessibility standards by visiting [Ontario's guide to training staff on accessibility](#).

Sample Policies

Learn more about [how to create an accessibility plan and policy](#). Use this [Accessibility Policy Sample](#) to help you develop a policy that fits your organization.

Making Your Workplace Accessible

Learn how to make your workplace accessible by visiting the [Accessible Workplaces guide](#).

What if you own a small business with no HR department? What practical resources are available?

[Workplace Safety and Prevention Services](#) in Ontario has free easy-to-use checklists and resources that reflect current legislative requirements. There are resources especially designed to help small-to-medium sized employers including a small business checklist, a safety orientation handbook and safety checks for workers. There is also a Small Business Advisory Service and a Small Business Center.²² Additional resources can be found on the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety website.²³

Step 2: Seek Advice

Maybe you have reviewed some online resources but need additional advice about how to get started. Where can you go?

Organizations such as the Ontario Disability Employment Network,²⁴ INNOVA Solution²⁵ and the Mental Health Commission of Canada²⁶ offer workplace assessments and staff training. Although some free services are available, these services are typically paid for by the employers.

Interested in learning more about workplace mental health strategies? The Canadian Mental Health Association and the Mental Health Commission of Canada collaborated to create the Takeaways Toolkit with checklists for employers. As noted in the toolkit, “a review and update of existing tactics can take you a long way to ensuring you are on the right track to promoting the psychological health and safety of your employees.”²⁷ Learn about practical examples of what other organizations did to enhance their workplaces.²⁸

There is also Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, which is a national standard for psychological health and safety in the workplace.²⁹



Step 3: Hire, Train and Retain

What to think about when hiring apprentices with disabilities

Here are some of the promising practices identified by employers, trainers and representatives from organizations that support persons with disabilities:

- Ensure the candidate is ready to be successful in an apprenticeship. Sometimes an individual has interest in the skilled trades but needs to complete a pre-apprenticeship program first in order to familiarize themselves with trade-specific tools and to improve their numeracy and literacy skills.
- Review your job posting, applications and workplace materials. Are they presented in accessible formats? Write them in plain language. People who are neurodivergent, for example, might need more clearly written instructions with pictures and larger print. Consider developing written checklists in addition to providing instructions verbally.
- Look for transferable skills in resumé and for any unique strengths that an individual might bring to the job
- Re-think the formal interview process. Invite all candidates to tour your workplace and explain all the aspects of the work you do at your company. Get to know the candidates through informal conversations with them. Introduce them to their potential supervisors.
- Have a clear onboarding and orientation process
- Work with organizations that offer job coaches or develop a member of your own staff to mentor apprentices. The coach may require specialized skills, such as understanding executive functioning or differing communication styles. Encourage the coach to communicate with the apprentices regularly.
- Continue to seek help from the organizations that support persons with disabilities. Representatives from these organizations can brainstorm solutions that can help you and also the apprentices

“Inclusion requires intentional effort. Be pro-active. Remove barriers. Change the workplace, not the employee.” - Interviewee

What information should be shared when hiring apprentices?

When you hire someone, the AODA legislation requires you to provide the apprentice with the following notifications and information:

- You should notify candidates of possible accommodations that can be requested for the interview process.
- Upon your offer of employment, notify employees of your company’s accommodation policies for disabled employees.
- You should provide information to employees about the Employment Standards Act.³⁰

When recruiting apprentices, what organizations should you reach out to?

You will save yourself time by reaching out to the organizations that can connect you with potential candidates who are eager to work in the skilled trades.³¹ Here are a few examples of organizations that will help you connect with candidates: Abilities to Work, My Job Match, Job Ability Canada, Career Services, Canadian Association for Supported Employment, and Inclusion Canada.³²

What should you think about when training apprentices?

Employers, trainers and organizations that support persons with disabilities identified these promising practices for training apprentices with disabilities:

- Have apprentices demonstrate what they can do to build their confidence. Put less emphasis on written tests and assignments.
- Support apprentices with customized learning and accommodation plans based on their individual needs
- Work collaboratively with apprentices to develop solutions
- Seek help from the local apprenticeship office or organizations that support persons with disabilities. Learning supports or free job coaching services may be available.

What information needs to be shared with apprentices?

When accommodating employees, the supports that the AODA legislation requires include:

- Providing updated information to employees whenever there are changes to existing accommodation policies
- Providing accessible formats and communication supports for general information available to employees within the workspace and other information that is required for them to complete tasks
- Providing individualized workplace emergency response information
- Upon receiving consent from the employee requiring assistance, providing individualized workplace emergency response information to another employee who can assist during the emergency
- Upon employees requesting accommodations, promptly providing them with emergency response information
- Developing and implementing individual accommodation plans for any employees requesting accommodations
- Developing and implementing a return-to-work process for any employees returning from an absence that is related to their disability/condition and require accommodations
- Conducting performance management that recognizes the diverse and sometimes intersectional needs of employees as well as their individual accommodation plans
- Providing career development and advancement that recognize the diverse and intersectional needs of employees as well as their individual accommodation plans
- Upon redeployment, recognizing the diverse and intersectional needs of employees as well as their individual accommodation plans.³³

When an apprentice is struggling how do you get them some help?

Employers can reach out to their local provincial/territorial apprenticeship office if they would like to get help for their apprentice. An apprentice who has been assessed and identified as having a learning disability may receive extra time on examinations, a reader, a private room or other types of accommodation specifically based on their needs.

Employers can also reach out to the organizations that support persons with disabilities. Many of them will help employers pay for accommodations, such as workplace modifications, assistive devices or job coaching services. Organizations such as the Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work's Apprenticeship Program, Ontario Disability Employment Network, Abilities to Work, My Job Match, Career Services, Canadian Association for Supported Employment, and Inclusion Canada can also help employers figure out the appropriate accommodation needed for an employee.

Ontario Learning Network

Through the Ontario Learning Network, employers can access free advice and learning supports for apprentices in areas such as numeracy, literacy and writing.

Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work's Apprenticeship Program

The Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work's apprenticeship program offers programming designed to meet apprentices wherever they are on their training journey. The program is accessible for individuals who self-identify with a disability, including mental health challenges, learning disabilities, or physical disabilities. The Council's services are confidential and no doctor's notes or assessments are required. Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work staff deal one-on-one with apprentices to identify and address their specific needs. Some of the accommodations that have already been provided to apprentices as a part of the program include:

1. Personalized one-on-one support to overcome individual challenges
2. Provision of comfortable and safe personal protective equipment tailored for women apprentices
3. Access to assistive technologies for individuals with any visual, hearing, or learning difficulties
4. Case-by-case tuition support for specific trades
5. Wage subsidies (up to 12 weeks) to help apprentices gain valuable trade experience
6. Funding for tutoring to help apprentices get started.³⁴

What's the best way to retain an apprentice?

Employers, trainers and organizations that support apprentices with disabilities provided this advice:

- Nurture a supportive environment in your workplace
- Be pro-active in determining individual needs
- Help your apprentice to get assessed early on in the training. This assessment will ensure they will benefit from the learning supports they need from the beginning.
- Develop customized training plans for your apprentices
- Communicate regularly with your apprentices
- Connect your apprentices with encouraging mentors
- Allow apprentices to demonstrate their skills by showing you what they can do

Figure 3: Supporting Apprentice Success at the Workplace



“Having a mentor take an apprentice under their wing and have their back is what is going to make it possible for an apprentice with a disability to get through their journey. A mentor who has some training can help recognize if the apprentice needs extra support or encouragement to study before attending technical training. Identifying and supporting apprentices with disabilities is key. The earlier the better. A pro-active approach is best.”
-Interviewee

IBEW 353 Pathway Program

The IBEW 353 Pathway Program is making mental health a priority. As a part of the IBEW 353 Pathway Program staff receive training about mental health and can provide inclusive recruitment materials, accommodate participants and facilitate conversations with them.

All staff are trained using The Working Mind (TWM), Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and Equity Diversity Decolonization Inclusion (EDDI).³⁵ The same training is provided to program participants.

Recruitment materials include positive statements which reinforce that idea that the workplace is supportive of mental health concerns.

Staff also meet with participants individually on a regular basis to have open conversations with them about their progress and needs, including relevant accommodations.

Participants have access to a library of mental health self-help workbooks and mental health counselling through a community partner.

Participants are also provided with information about accommodations and human rights in Ontario.

Red Seal Exam Supports

Is your apprentice anxious about taking the Certificate of Qualification examination? Employers can direct apprentices to Red Seal Secretariat resources that are designed to help apprentices prepare for this examination. Examples of resources include:

- ✓ Red Seal Exam Preparation Guide
- ✓ Self-Assessment
- ✓ Exam Breakdowns
- ✓ Sample Questions³⁶

Apprentices may also receive exam accommodations if they meet the provincial/territorial requirements.

Next Steps

Now that you have learned about key terms, helpful organizations, promising practices and widely available supports, we hope you feel better prepared to take the next step to successfully advance your apprentices throughout all the stages of their training. By working together to support apprentices with disabilities, we are building Canada's skilled trades workforce!

Endnotes

- 1 CAF-FCA, 2024 National Apprenticeship Report: A Report for CAF-FCA Members, (Ottawa: CAF-FCA, 2024).
- 2 For more details on the Employer Guide, visit: [CAF-FCA's Employer Guide](#).
- 3 [The Business Case for Employing People with Disabilities](#).
Original sources are available through [Employment Accessibility Resource Network \(EARN\)](#).
For additional information on the business case, visit the [Discoverability Network Business Roadmap](#).
- 4 See [EARN](#) again for further details.
- 5 See [EARN](#) again for further details.
- 6 See [EARN](#) again for further details.
- 7 See [EARN](#) again for further details.
- 8 For more information, see the Reports on Disability and Accessibility in Canada [A demographic, employment and income profile of persons with disabilities aged 15 years and over in Canada, 2022](#) and information on the disability rate in Canada, see [Statistics Canada](#) for further details.
- 9 See [Statistics Canada](#) again for further details.
- 10 CAF-FCA, Apprentices with Disabilities Environmental Scan, (CAF-FCA: Ottawa, 2021).
- 11 For more information, see the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) and explore various definitions of disability on the [Ontario Human Rights Commission - What is Disability?](#) Please note any definition used cannot contradict laws locally or provincially.
- 12 Explore the [CCRW Toolkit](#) for more resources on disability accommodations.
- 13 For information on legal and human rights, see [Legal and Human Rights - Breaking it Down](#)
- 14 For more information about accessibility laws, see [About Accessibility Laws - Ontario.ca](#).
- 15 See [Ontario.ca](#) again for further details.
- 16 For information on the duty to accommodate, see the [Ontario Human Rights Commission - Duty to Accommodate Policy](#).
- 17 For examples of accommodations for various disabilities, see the [Job Accommodation Network](#).
- 18 For more information, see the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and [Accessibility in Ontario](#).
- 19 For information on the business case for employing people with disabilities, see [The Business Case for People with Disabilities - EARN](#).
- 20 There are local apprenticeship offices across Ontario: [Employment Ontario apprenticeship offices](#).
- 21 For more information on the disclosure of disability in the workplace, see [AODA: Disclosure of Disability in the Workplace](#).
- 22 For workplace safety resources, visit [Workplace Safety & Prevention Services | WSPS](#).
- 23 For resources on health and safety, visit [Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety \(CCOHS\)](#).
- 24 For disability inclusion resources, visit [Ontario Disability Employment Network \(ODEN\)](#).
- 25 Learn more about disability inclusion at [The INNOVA Solution](#).
- 26 For workplace mental health resources, visit [Canadian Mental Health Association \(CMHA\) - Workplace Mental Health](#).
- 27 Visit [CMHA Workplace Mental Health - Takeaways again for further details](#).

- 28 Visit [CMHA Workplace Mental Health - Takeaways again for further details](#).
- 29 For the National Standard for mental health in workplaces, visit [Mental Health Commission of Canada - National Standard](#).
- 30 For details on the Employment Standards Act, visit [Your guide to the Employment Standards Act](#).
- 31 For Ontario government forms, visit [Ontario Government Forms](#).
- 32 To connect with potential candidates, connect with [Abilities to Work](#), [My Job Match](#), [Job Ability Canada](#), [Career Services](#), [About Supported Employment](#) and [Inclusion Canada-Employment](#).
- 33 For more information about accommodations, see [Canada's Wellness and Inclusion for Public Servants](#). Also, see [Canadian Human Rights Commission - Duty to Accommodate](#).
- 34 Learn more about supporting Red Seal trades at [CCRW - Supporting Red Seal Trades](#).
- 35 For more information, see [The Working Mind for the Trades](#), and [Mental Health First Aid](#).
- 36 For information on Red Seal certification, see [Red Seal - National Trade Certification](#).