

STRATEGY AND STANDARD: TWO RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN DISABILITY AND WORK

by Uyen Vu and Cindy Moser

Part 1: A Pan-Canadian Strategy for Disability and Work

Advocates of more accessible and inclusive labour markets for persons with disabilities are now promoting the adoption and implementation of a voluntary pan-Canadian strategy that aims to improve work opportunities for persons with disabilities. The strategy was released in Ottawa in December 2019 at the third annual conference of the Disability and Work in Canada (DWC) Steering Committee, the group behind the development of the strategy.

With a vision of Canada as a country where persons with and without disabilities have equal opportunities and choices in their careers, jobs and work, *Moving Forward Together: A Pan-Canadian Strategy for Disability and Work* centres on two main objectives:

- (1) **Fostering disability-confident and inclusive workplaces**, in which employers understand the value of, and are committed to, hiring, managing, accommodating, supporting, and retaining persons with disabilities, and are confident in their ability to successfully do so. Initiatives to achieve this address workplace design, workplace accessibility, supports available to employers, and workplace culture change.
- (2) **Developing comprehensive supports for persons with disabilities**, so that they are supported in their pursuit of meaningful employment, while assured of income and benefits that provide a life

with dignity above the poverty line. Initiatives to achieve this focus on government supports for persons with disabilities, the navigability and alignment of support programs, and school-to-work transitions.

At the launch of the strategy in December, the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, federal Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, spoke of DWC potentially gaining ground on greater labour market inclusion of persons with disabilities by making the link between accommodating injured workers, which employers are more familiar with, and employing persons with disabilities. "What a strategically innovative way to get employers comfortable with disability," she said. "We're going to be able to talk about inclusion, disability and accommodation a little differently now."

Qualtrough also spoke of a sense of momentum and readiness for change. *The Accessible Canada Act*, which was passed unanimously in June 2019, "was the only piece of legislation in the last session over four years that received all-party consent," she noted. "That's because Canada is ready. We are ready."

The origins of the strategy

The seeds of the DWC strategy were planted in 2017 when the Centre for Research on Work Disability Policy (CRWDP), the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW), Inclusion Newfoundland (InclusionNL), and the Ontario Network of Injured

Workers' Groups (ONIWG) formed the DWC Steering Committee. Representatives of these organizations were already working together in the community caucus formed by CRWDP, a research partnership co-led by Institute for Work & Health (IWH) Senior Scientist Dr. Emile Tompa and headquartered at the Institute. The initial aim of the committee was to host the first Disability and Work in Canada conference.

That aim soon expanded, after a decision was made at the first conference to develop a pan-Canadian strategy on disability and work. "We felt the timing was right," says Tompa, pointing to some compelling statistics from the Canadian Survey on Disability (Statistics Canada, 2017).

First, persons with disabilities are under-employed; 59 per cent of working-age adults with disabilities are employed, compared with 80 per cent of adults without disabilities. Among working-age adults with disabilities who are neither employed nor at school, two in five (39 per cent) have the potential to work. This represents nearly 645,000 individuals with disabilities who have the potential to work and are not working.

As well, persons with disabilities have lower incomes. Working-age adults with more severe disabilities have a median after-tax annual income (from all sources, including work earnings and benefits from support programs) of \$19,200, compared to \$34,300 for those with milder disabilities and \$39,000 for those without disabilities.

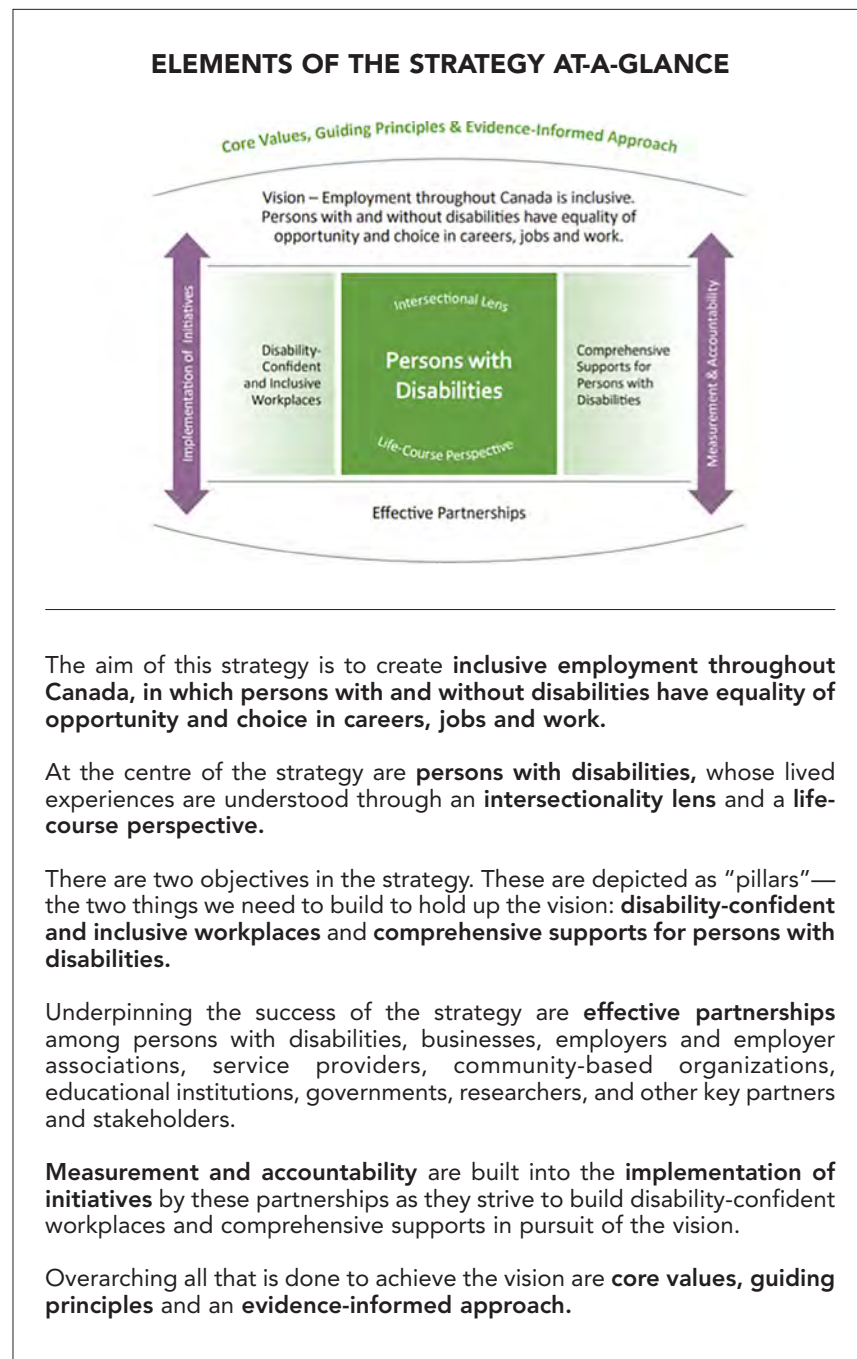
Finally, persons with disabilities are also more likely to live in poverty. Among working-age adults, 28 per cent of those with more severe disabilities live below Canada's official poverty line, compared to 14 per cent of those with milder disabilities and 10 per cent of those without disabilities.

"At the same time, Canadian businesses and employers are facing a labour shortage that is not expected to ease for 10 years," notes Tompa. "Canada cannot achieve its full potential as an inclusive and productive society until these inequalities are addressed."

After two years of consultations with persons with disabilities, injured workers, disability organizations, labour/unions, employers, businesses, service providers, and government representatives from across the country—through national conferences, provincial/territorial-based focus groups, and an online survey that received more than 400 responses—the DWC Steering Committee finalized the pan-Canadian strategy on disability for its launch in December 2019 (see the sidebar for the strategy at-a-glance).

At the end of the 2019 DWC conference, long-time inclusion and disability rights advocate Mary Reid talked about moving the strategy forward. "The strategy will take on a life of its own. Collectively in this room, we don't own it. The country owns it. But we're responsible ... for taking this strategy and ensuring everybody across this country feels part of it and can feel equally proud of it," she said in her closing remarks. "It's now up to us what we do as individuals or organizations to advance this strategy, to take it back to our workplaces, our colleagues, our supervisors and our communities."

To download the full strategy, go to: <https://www.crwdp.ca/en/dwc-strategy> To see videos, pre-



sentation slides and reports from the launch conference, go to: www.crwdp.ca/en/national-conference-2019-disability-and-work-canada.

To keep up on this initiative, learn about future opportunities to get involved, and find out about the next DWC conference in December 2020, sign up for updates from CRWDP: <https://www.crwdp.ca/>

[en/crwdp-newsletter-mailing-list](https://www.crwdp.ca/en/crwdp-newsletter-mailing-list)

Part 2: Workplace Disability Management System Standard

A proposed new national standard from the CSA Group on work disability management systems is in its final stages, with publication of the voluntary standard expected by July 2020. IWH's Dr. Emile Tompa

chaired the CSA Group Technical Committee behind the standard. The standard is being spearheaded by the CSA Group, CRWDP and the Canadian Institute for Safety, Wellness and Performance (CISWP) at Conestoga College

CSA Z1011, *Workplace Disability Management System*, as it will be called, will offer standards of excellence and guidelines to help organizations in the hiring, onboarding, retention, management, and return to work of persons with occupational and non-occupational disabilities. As such, it will be a companion to the CSA Group's current management system standards on quality, environment, workplace health and safety and risk management.

An estimated 22 per cent of adults in Canada—more than 6.2 million individuals—have a disability, according to the most recent Canadian Survey on Disability (Sta-

tistics Canada, 2017). And every year, tens of thousands of Canadians become disabled and are unable to work, thereby becoming excluded from the numerous health advantages of workforce participation.

"Creating a national standard for work disability management systems is key to improving work disability management practices and reducing the economic burden of work disability in Canada," says Tompa.

Tompa and Dr. Amin Yazdani, vice-chair of the CSA 2011 Technical Committee and director of CISWP at Conestoga College, led the research that got the CSA Group standard-development process off the ground. Dr. David Brown, medical director at Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC), was also a vice-chair of the CSA 2011 Technical Committee. Additional experts and collabora-

tors engaged in the development of the CSA Z1011 standard included representatives from government bodies, health and safety organizations, mental health associations, injured worker and disability communities, and employer and worker representatives.

The standard will be voluntary. It will take a proactive systems approach that considers roles and responsibilities across an organization, resulting in a work disability management system that exceeds legislated minimum requirements. The system outlined will be worker-centred, take a case-by-case, biopsychosocial and contextualized approach, and focus on maintaining work engagement.

Four areas will be at the core of the standard:

(1) Work disability management system—the foundation for the



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organizational system that sets out expectations with respect to management commitment and leadership, responsibilities and accountability, and policies and procedures;

(2) Planning—including the review of current internal and external practices and resources, the identification of existing gaps, the establishment of objectives and targets appropriate for the organization, and the development of an action plan to achieve them;

(3) Implementation—the implementation of an orderly and well-thought-out plan using the resources available;

(4) Performance monitoring, evaluation and continual improvement—including internal audits, management reviews and other measures to identify successes, as well as opportunities to inter-

vene to reduce risks and increase efficiencies.

Currently, no national or international standard is available to assist Canadian employers in achieving excellence in their work disability management systems—a human resources and occupational health and safety issue that is relevant to all organizations in all sectors of the economy, whether large or small, for-profit or not-for-profit, private or public.

“Since this is the first standard of its kind not only in Canada, but also in the world, Canada will be supporting the development and uptake of an innovative solution to the growing problem of work disability,” says Yazdani. “The project will position Canada as a national and global leader in this area.”

The standard, once implemented, is expected to help businesses achieve fewer workplace injury recurrences, fewer

long-term work-related disabilities, fewer work disability absences, lower workers’ compensation costs, improved operational performance, and increased worker engagement and productivity—putting Canadian workplaces at an advantage in the competitive, global economy.

For more information on the standard, listen to an IWH Speaker Series presented by Tompa, available as a slidecast at: <https://www.iwh.on.ca/events/speaker-series/2020-feb-04>. When published, the new standard will be available from the CSA Group: <https://www.csagroup.org/>

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