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 strat-
egy 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-Canadi-
yan 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 
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 disabil-
ities, so that they are supported in 
their pursuit of meaningful employ-
ment, 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 Develop-
ment 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 employ-
ing persons with disabilities. “What 
a strategically innovative way to get 
employers comfortable with disabil-
ity,” she said. “We’re going to be 
able to talk about inclusion, disabil-
ity and accommodation a little dif-
ferently now.”

Qualtrough also spoke of a 
sense of momentum and readi-
ness 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 strate-
gy were planted in 2017 when 
the Centre for Research on Work 
Disability Policy (CRWDP), the 
Canadian Council on Rehabilita-
tion and Work (CCRW), Inclusion 
Newfoundland (InclusionNL), and 
the Ontario Network of Injured 
Workers’ Groups (ONIWG) formed 
the DWC Steering Committee. Representatives of these organi-
zations were already working 
together in the community cau-
rus 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 disabili-
ties 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 disabili-
ties who have the potential to 
work and are not working.

As well, persons with disabilities 
have lower incomes. Working-age 
adults with more severe disabili-
ties 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.crowdp.ca/en/dwc-strategy To see videos, presentation slides and reports from the launch conference, go to: www.crowdp.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.crowdp.ca/en/crowdp-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 (Statistics 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 collaborators 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...
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 intervene 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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Application Deadline Extended to:

**September 15, 2020**

Due to the current circumstances, OOHNA has decided to extend the application period for the Nancy Hicks Bursary. We are pleased to provide financial assistance through this bursary to Occupational Health Nurses who wish to further their education.

Please review the **bursary** conditions before submitting your application at the following link: **NANCY HICKS BURSARY**

To Apply, complete the application form which can be downloaded [HERE](#). You can email the completed form to **coordinator@oohna.on.ca** or mailed to 701 Evans Ave., Suite 504, Toronto, Ontario M9C 1A3.