



Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians (AEBC), Toronto Chapter
/L'Alliance pour l'Égalité des Personnes Aveugles du Canada
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Inclusive Employment Advocacy Project

Annual Report 2017 (Year 1)

Overview:

Unemployment and underemployment of people with disabilities are extremely high, up to 70% for the blind and partially-sighted. Employment services, programs and opportunities are often hard to access for people with disabilities, especially those with added barriers due to gender, race, age or sexual orientation (Kirsh B., Stergiou-Kita M. et al. 2009) (Gilbride D., Stensrud R. et al. 2003, Collin, Lafontaine-Emon et al. 2013, Turcotte 2014). They need to be better engaged and their participation increased in existing employment programs and services. We proposed a peer engagement and poverty reduction project which filled an unmet need to engage and equip people with disabilities, especially those blind and partially sighted, to self-advocate for equal access to employment services, programs and opportunities. Through our advocacy resource gathering/development, education, training and mentoring, the disability community will better present a compelling case for our inclusion and systemic change in the employment service sector. The results are increased participation of the disability population in the employment support system, greater collaboration among equity-seeking groups, a wider adoption of accessible practices, and integration of people with disabilities in the workforce.

Phase I Focus Groups - Identifying the Advocacy Needs of Job Seekers with Disabilities

Recruitment:

Between January and May 2017, seven focus groups were held, with 8 to 22 individuals per session, facilitated by the Project Coordinator and Project Manager. Both participants and facilitators were persons with disabilities. Participants were recruited by invitations to AEBC members; partnering organizations, other community organizations and programs that serve the client group we were seeking (Appendix A). Every participant completed a questionnaire to summarize demographic attributes (disability; gender, age, level of education completed, employment status etc....)

Participant Characteristics:

Overall, 77 individuals with disabilities participated in the seven focus groups.

Most individuals who participated in the focus groups (N=35) were not actively seeking employment (those between 27 and 50) and retired or over 60 (N=3), while those seeking employment represented a smaller number of individuals (N=7) between 18 and 26. There was a higher incidence of females (N=42), than males (N=25); and other sexual orientation (N=4). In terms of disability, most individuals had mental health conditions; a small number had physical disabilities (most common was cerebral palsy); a few had chronic health problems, while participants who identified as being blind or visually impaired (N=8), or being deaf or hard of hearing (2) were in the minority.

Data Analysis:

An interview guide was developed by the project team in order to learn about and identify the challenges and/or barriers that participants encountered when receiving employment services, obtaining employment, and/or workplace accommodations. All focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of analysis. A comparative analysis was completed by the Project Coordinator and Manager. It was found that focus group participants experienced many similar challenges in receiving employment counselling from service providers, yet there were also some challenges unique to specific disabilities (blind, deaf/hard of hearing, physical disability, episodic, and mental health conditions). Four main area of challenges were identified:

1. Diverse challenges experienced by job seekers with disabilities

Several participants conveyed that they found it very difficult to participate in the job search process when career and employment counsellors don't know and understand the needs of individuals with disabilities. The most significant barriers identified were communications and attitudinal barriers. For example, job seekers who are blind or visually impaired cannot actively engage in the job search process without the use of technology (screen-reading software) which would provide access to online job search resources and employment search engines, as well as having access to materials in large print or braille.

Feeling of inadequacy were evident in most participants but manifested differently between client groups. Individuals with mental health conditions feel there is a stigma attached to them, experienced when employers regard them as incapable of doing the job they are being considered for. Job seekers with physical disabilities (using wheelchairs) were perceived as not being able to meet the demands of employment opportunities they were being considered for, because their physical disability is visible. While job seekers with episodic, chronic, or invisible disabilities found employers completely unreceptive to their circumstances.

2. Gaps in programs and services for creating, supporting, and maintaining employment for people with disabilities

Many participants conveyed that many organizations and companies with equal opportunity employment strategies are not demonstrating what these strategies mean in terms of their responsibility to create and support a diverse workforce. Furthermore, employers lack the knowledge and appreciation of the capabilities, assets and needs of job seekers with disabilities. They are also unfamiliar with the needs of prospective employees, and the available workplace accommodations to enhance their participation in competitive employment.

Consequently, bridging the gap between equal-opportunity employment policy and the private and public sectors is paramount. This can be achieved by expanding the awareness and knowledge of employers in the areas of employment policies and work-related accommodations which employees with disabilities require. Employment service providers with adequate knowledge and inclusive practices would help to bridge this gap.

3. Self-advocacy and disclosure resulting in negative consequences

The third issue that was identified by many participants was that being a strong self-advocate can have negative repercussions even if he/she is qualified for a job.

Many individuals were unable to complete a job interview because interviewers and/or employers are often unreceptive to providing accommodations (interpreter for a deaf candidate, materials in braille for a blind person, or access to technologies that reduce the barriers). Even though self-disclosure had been encouraged by service providers, doing so always backfired both during the interview process and after being hired (even with equal opportunity employers).

Some participants could not make it through the interview process because accommodations needed were lacking (i.e. Interpreter for the deaf or hard of hearing). Other participants were fired because their performance was deemed unacceptable, not for lack of trying, but because their employers failed to provide the workplace accommodations they needed to do their job.

4. ODSP an **disincentive to employment**

Job seekers who were unemployed at the time of their participation in the Focus groups expressed an interest in participating in competitive employment but felt that receiving ODSP hindered this possibility because of the restrictions associated with being a recipient. Also, many individuals were not sure how to manage work without jeopardizing their benefits.

Despite these challenges, many participants had some positive experiences at different times when they found programs that were beneficial, such as completing the SEA Program (Self Employment Assistance Program), which no longer exists but did provide participants with disabilities with the accommodations needed.

Phase 2 Employment Education Sessions

The issues that participants identified in the focus groups provided the foundation for developing and facilitating five employment education and training workshops with the goal of accomplishing two objectives:

- 1) Enhancing self-advocacy abilities of job seekers with disabilities (knowledge and skills needed to successfully access the employment services to effectively engage in the job search process)
- 2) Expand the knowledge and awareness of service providers so they can support job seekers with disabilities in their efforts to achieve their career and employment goals

In order to accomplish these objectives, the following five employment education workshops were developed and facilitated by subject matter experts (SMEs).

1. The Essentials of the Job Search Process
2. Resourcing the resources-- Keep your eye on the prize...a JOB
3. Know who you are and what you need
4. Educating your Job Coach and Employment Counselor
5. Dealing with ODSP and Work

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The five themes identified for the employment education sessions addressed the gaps in employment services for people with disabilities, identifying and accessing funding and employment resources and supports to receiving training and education for specific career paths, as well, obtaining employment in their field of training and experience. While there is a greater awareness of the needs of job seekers with disabilities in the employment service sector, many felt that their voices are not being heard, and believed that service providers did not have the proper knowledge and training to place them in appropriate job opportunities.

The education and training sessions took place once a month in an accessible space in different venues in Toronto. The sessions were facilitated by subject matter experts (SME's) to ensure that participants were provided with the most current and comprehensive account of the issues being addressed by individuals with expertise in these areas. Please refer to **appendices A** for list of the five employment workshop sessions and SME's who facilitated them.

Recruitment of Participants:

An invitation (Appendix C) was sent to individuals who participated in the focus groups for the first part of the project. The invitation was also sent to partnering organizations as well as other community organizations that provide services to the client group that would benefit from attending and representing their disability.

At the end of each session participants were asked to complete an online survey that was designed to gather information on demographic attributes, as well as providing feedback on the usefulness of the education session.

The employment education sessions were held once a month, for five months between July and November. Each session was three hours (6 to 9pm). Overall, 62 participants attended one or multiple sessions. 15 to 23 job seekers with diverse disabilities attended each of the sessions.

Demographics:

Most of the participants were women between 22 and 70 years old. There were always one or two men at each session. 5 to 10% of the participants were from visible minority cultural groups in each session. There were a few seniors over 65 while youths under 24 were very few. Disability attributes included 33% with physical disability and/or medical conditions, 5 to 10% were blind or visually impaired, hard of hearing or deaf. there were 2 or more participants from the LGBTQ community. Those with invisible disabilities were not reflected in the responses from the survey/questionnaire on each session.

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Everyone who attended did not complete the survey/questionnaire and/or left some questions blank. Here is the link to the first survey participants completed: Survey Link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/SessionIEvaluation>

Employment status of Participants:

Most participants were unemployed and seeking employment at the time of their participation. Several participants were older job seekers who were struggling to find employment because of chronic illness and/or disability. Thirty-three to forty percent of participants were completing a post-secondary education, or have completed formal education and training, and have found it difficult to find work. A very small percentage of participants were retired but continue to be interested in participating in initiatives that will improve opportunities for people with disabilities.

Qualitative Findings:

Many participants found the sessions to be very informative, and felt that they would use the knowledge and skills they acquired to self-advocate for the services and supports they need to engage in the job search process.

Peer support and information sharing increased as the workshops continued. Participants realized they have experiences and knowledge valuable to others and started speaking up more to contribute to the discussions. Some participants showed greater confidence and increased positivity at the end of the five workshops.

Staff from employment agencies and service providers also attended some of the sessions to learn about resources and helpful tips for their clients. Service providers with no disabilities were able to hear from potential clients their need for appropriate services.

International Day Event

On December 2, 2017, AEBC, Toronto chapter, organized an International Day of Persons with Disabilities event with a focus on employment. This event was well attended and provided a platform for AEBC to present findings from the first year of our project. Employment strategy undertaken by the Ontario government was presented by Tracy MacCharles, Minister responsible for Accessibility, and from the City of Toronto by Barbara Shulman, HR Director.

There was also a panel discussion where seven employment agencies presented their programs, services and strategies for assisting job seekers with disabilities. An opportunity to network with 8 more employment service providers was provided after the panel for the 80 participants at the event. See Appendix D for a list of panellists, and community organizations, and employment services.

The link to a video of the education and training sessions and event can be accessed at <http://www.blindcanadians.ca/participate/chapters>

Suggestions for supporting labor market participation of people with disabilities:

The findings from the first year of our project have raised a number of issues, though not new, need to be addressed in the immediate future. Government-funded employment programs and services are not adequate for job-seekers with disabilities. Even employment service providers specifically for persons with disabilities are failing to appreciate the assets and needs of their clients. As a result, potential employees with good education and extensive experience end up discouraged and excluded from the workforce. Employment agencies are the first point of contact for job-seekers with disabilities in their job search or return to job process. When employment counsellors and job-developers exhibit the same attitudinal barriers as employers, the linkage to meaningful employment is further broken.

Employment programs and services must bridge the gap between government policies and employer practices to effectively create a diverse and dynamic workforce. Employment agencies, especially those tasked with serving persons with disabilities, must be experts in disability issues and strong advocates for their clients, while job-seekers with disabilities must be better self-advocates to educate and work alongside employment service providers to achieve the desired employment outcomes. Suggestions include:

1. Education and training for service providers and employers on best practices in working with people with diverse disabilities
2. Education on the capabilities, value, needs and workplace accommodations for individuals with disabilities
3. Internship and apprenticeship opportunities that are inclusive of and specifically for persons with diverse disabilities
4. Career planning for college and university students with disabilities
5. Self-advocacy training for students and job seekers with disabilities

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Year Two of the Project at a Glance

In this phase, 10 to 12 pairs of mentors-mentees with disabilities will approach three employment service providers each to enhance their services for job-seekers with disabilities. In doing so, they will have the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge, skills and resources they gained in Year One of the Inclusive Employment Advocacy Project (<http://www.blindcanadians.ca/>).

AEBC gratefully acknowledges the funding provided by the City of Toronto

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References

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Gilbride D., et al. (2003). "Identification of the characteristics of work environments and employers open to hiring and accommodating people with disabilities." Rehabilitation Counselling Bulletin **46**(3): 130-138.

Kirsh B., et al. (2009). "From margins to mainstream: what do we know about work integration for persons with brain injury, mental illness and intellectual disability?" Work **32**(4): 391-405.

Turcotte, M. (2014). Insights on Canadian Society – Persons with disabilities and employment. Ottawa, Canada, StatisticsCanada.

AEBC gratefully acknowledges the funding provided by the City of Toronto

APPENDICES

Appendix A

**Inclusive Employment Advocacy Project Communiqué
and Special Invitation**

The Alliance for Equality for Blind Canadians (AEBC) is launching a City of Toronto-funded project to provide new self-advocacy tools, resources and training for people with disabilities seeking employment. This peer engagement project will equip people with disabilities from diverse backgrounds to better advocate for equal access to employment services, programs and opportunities.

Project activities include identifying barriers, gathering and developing advocacy resources, education and training. Project outcomes include participants being able to present a case for inclusion in employment services and programs.

Project participants will consist of persons with different disabilities from diverse groups including women, youth, seniors, ethno-racial minorities, and LGBTQ community members, among others, who are unemployed or under-employed.

If you are a person with a disability seeking employment, or are currently under employed, you are invited to join two parts of the project:

1. Focus Groups in five regions of the Toronto Area: Downtown Toronto, North York, Scarborough, East York/Beaches, and Etobicoke/West Toronto.
2. Five education/training sessions, developed from their recommendations, to be led by Subject Matter Experts.

We want to identify from Focus Group members:

- **Their initial knowledge (if any) of the AODA, and whether people see it as having a benefit in their lives;**
- **Whether there are any gaps in the AODA Standards related to assisting individuals seeking meaningful employment;**
- **Their experiences with prejudice and discrimination (if any);**
- **Their prior experiences related to receiving employment support and/or being employed;**
- **How they deal with disclosing their disability to others; and**
- **What we should address in the Education/Training Sessions to maximize the effectiveness and helpfulness of these sessions.**

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The first focus group [Downtown] will be at the 519 Community Centre, on Tuesday, March 28th, 1:00 to 3:00 PM.

The second focus group [North York] will be at the CNIB, on Tuesday, April 4 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM.

The third focus group [Scarborough] will be at Variety Village, on Friday, April 7, 1:30 to 3:30 PM.

The fourth focus group [East York/Beaches] will be at Community Centre, on Wednesday, April 12 6:30 to 8:30 PM.

The fifth focus group [Etobicoke] will be at Loblaws, on Friday, April 28 1:30 to 3:30 PM.

If interested in other locations and times, please write to the e-mail address below.

Please notify Michael of your interest and any accommodation needs at least a week before the start of the focus group that you wish to attend (for example, for the first focus group on March 28th, please e-mail about accommodations by March 21st). Please e-mail him at michaeldmcneely@gmail.com.

**Thank you for your time and consideration,
Michael McNeely,
Inclusive Employment Advocacy Project Coordinator**

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Appendix B

Education/Training Session Topics

1. The Essentials of the Job Search Process (Joanna Samuels from Reena) July 2017
 - Not client centred? Surprise! Employment service and program funding
 - Getting the most out of your service providers
 - Getting the resources and expertise that you need.
 - Encourage collaboration with other agencies/resources
 - How to deal with ignorance and barriers, and avoid being written off

2. “Resourcing resources-- Keep your eye on the prize...a JOB” (Mary Daniels of D.I.C.E) August 2017
 - Finding what you need-the shopping list
 - What you’re entitled to. And who can help you
 - Be independent-be “resource-full”
 - Better research and resourcing skills
 - Polite persistence
 - Creating “flexibility”
 - For the self-employed

3. Know who you are and what you need (Carolyn McDougal of Holland Bloorview) September 2017
 - Are you seeking a job or a career
 - Know the path to get to your goal
 - Know your job market
 - You ARE unique!
 - Best Expression- *‘selling yourself’ or more?
 - Confidence, It’s not personal!-even though it is
 - Channelling your anger, depression, and self-pity. How to be strong
 - “Bouncing Back” Dealing with disappointment

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4. Educating your Job Coach and Employment Counselor (Dianne Wintermute of ARCH Disability Law Centre) October 2017

- Knowing your rights and obligations AODA/Human Rights
 - basic knowledge, and how to apply it
 - accommodations for applications, testing and interviews
 - discrimination
- Talking about accommodations-educating others
 - accommodations for Mental Health and other invisible disabilities
- Changing yourself from a liability to an asset
- *resourcing the information and technology
- Easing their fears.
- Success stories

5. Dealing with ODSP and Work (Special session) with Kyle Voce November 2017

- Understanding the ODSP system
 - claw backs, claw backs, claw backs
 - keeping important benefits
- Maximizing the ODSP programs
- Moving from ODSP to Employment
- For the self-employed
- Using other services when receiving ODSP services

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APPENDIX C

**Workshops on how to maximize employment services
for people with disabilities**

An Invitation...

The sessions will be hosted by a group of dynamic and seasoned professionals. Through these we hope to further equip and sharpen our advocacy skills when using employment agencies and services throughout the GTA.

We are looking for interested participants who can commit to attending at least 3 of the 5 sessions. Those who do will receive an honorarium in appreciation for their invaluable contribution to the project. There may also be an opportunity for those who have completed the sessions to take part in the second year of our project (pending approval) where we will match participants with experienced advocates as mentors.

Here are the sessions...

Session 1:

“Job Search Essentials for Job Seekers with ABILITIES”

with

Joanna Samuels of Reena

July 25, 2017 (OISE)

Session 2:

“Resourcing Resources—Finding what you need, and getting what you need”

with

Mary Daniels of D.I.C.E.

August 29, 2017

6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

(Ryerson University)

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Session 3:

“Know Who You Are and What You Need”
With
Carolyn McDougal of Holland Bloorview
(September 26, 2017)
6:00 to 9:00 pm
At 500 University Avenue, Room 150

Session 4:

“Educating your Job Coach and Employment Counselor”
With
Dianne Wintermute of ARCH Disability Law Centre
(October 24, 2017)
Location: 55 University Avenue, 15th Floor, Toronto, ON M5J 2H7

Session 5:

“Dealing with ODSP/OW and Work (Special session)”
With
Kyle Voce
November 21, 2017
6-9
Location: 500 University Avenue, Room 150

If you are interested in participating, have any accommodation requests, or if you have questions, contact Laura Moll at lmoll@rogers.com.

Sincere thanks.

APENDIX D

List of organizations participating in the International Day event

Collaborating Organizations	Tabling Organizations	Organizations on the Panel	Guest Speakers
Balance for Blind Adults	Toronto District School Board, Next Steps Employment Centre, Riverdale	D.I.C.E. Assessment & Employment Counselling Services	Tracy MacCharles Minister of Government and Consumer Services and Minister Responsible for Accessibility
Centre for Independent Living, Toronto	Ontario Federation for Cerebral Palsy	TDSB Next Steps Employment Centre, Riverdale	Susan Picarello Assistant Deputy Minister, Accessibility Policy, Employment Strategy and Outreach Division
Citizens with Disabilities Ontario	Career Edge	ODSP Employment Supports	Barbara Shulman HR Director, Strategic Recruitment, Compensation & Employment Services, City of Toronto
Canadian Hearing Society	Ontario Disability Support Program	St. Stephen's Community House Employment Services	
CNIB	Christian Horizons, Central District	Canadian Hearing Society	
Magnet	Magnet	Magnet	
National Educational Association of Disabled Students	Community Living Toronto		
	Community Outreach Canada	Career Edge	
	Next-step Employment Centre - Riverdale		

