The Conference Board of Canada

Overcoming Workplace Stigma

Inclusive Strategies for Supporting People Experiencing Disability

Issue briefing | January 9, 2026

Contents

Key findings

- Nearly half of the people experiencing disability who participated in our survey (47.4 per cent) chose not to tell their employer about a disability because they didn't want to be seen differently, and approximately one in three (29.6 per cent) were worried about discrimination. Nearly one-third (32.6 per cent) of survey respondents chose not to disclose their disability to their employer because they feared it would limit their opportunities.

- Employees with disabilities typically disclose only when necessary—such as to request accommodation (53.6 per cent), explain performance issues (50.3 per cent), or account for absences (42.7 per cent). Concerns around stigma and discrimination factor into decisions not to disclose.

- Nearly one in five employers (19.7 per cent) told us that a lack of knowledge hindered their efforts toward disability inclusion. When employers don't know how to support employees with disabilities (29.5 per cent) or how to foster accessibility (16.4 per cent), this makes it harder for employees to seek support.

- Among employees who requested accommodations, one in four (25.6 per cent) said their employer didn't know how to handle the process, and one in five (20.9 per cent) said communication about the process was insufficient.

- Interviewees described differences in how they were treated, depending on whether their disability was visible or not. Those with apparent disabilities noted managers and coworkers were more empathetic, while individuals with non-apparent disabilities experienced either a lack of sensitivity or outright rejection when disclosing their disability.

Breaking the silence: Addressing stigma in the workplace

Even well-intentioned employers are struggling to create inclusive work environments for people living with disabilities.

Despite numerous legislative, policy, and practice changes that are intended to ensure that people living with disabilities are fully engaged and supported at work, workplace leaders told us these programs are not having the desired impact. The culprit? Workplace stigma, as it limits the full participation of individuals living with disabilities.

Stigma, driven by ignorance, limits opportunities and holds back well-intentioned inclusion efforts. How can we address stigma to change workplaces?

To answer this question, we conducted an employer survey of 100 organizations, followed by 10 semi-structured interviews with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and human resources (HR) leaders, a nationally representative survey of 1,000 people with disabilities, and 30 semi-structured interviews with persons experiencing disability who were acting as mentors and mentees in a workplace mentorship program. Alongside our partner the Canadian Association for Supported Employment, we aimed to better understand how stigma and discrimination in the workplace are being experienced by people living with disabilities and to identify employer strategies that can enhance inclusion.

Workplace stigma in Canada

Findings from the research include that:

• Stigma thrives on misconceptions,
• Requesting accommodation can lead to discrimination,
• There is a perceived inequity in how those with apparent and non-apparent disabilities are treated.

Stigma and discrimination were mainly expressed through ableist perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours by both coworkers and managers, particularly affecting individuals with non-apparent disabilities. Fear of stigma also hindered workplace disclosure, potentially limiting access to accommodations for employees with disabilities.

Nearly one in four survey respondents (23.2 per cent) experienced stigma and 16.3 per cent faced retaliatory measures after making an accommodation request to their employer. In our workplace mentorship interviews, 13 of 15 mentees reported experiences of stigma and discrimination at work, highlighting the need for greater understanding of employees with disabilities and the barriers they face in the workplace.

Employers in our study also recognized that there is work to be done, with 29.5 per cent indicating that they were unequipped and unfamiliar with the processes through which to appropriately address accommodation requests.

In their own words

"Most often, able-bodied people make assumptions based on biases that are largely untrue."

"These symptoms worsen under stress, yet instead of compassion, I have encountered dehumanizing attitudes and impatience from those meant to provide care."

"The most disappointing part is that fully able-bodied people don't show the proper empathy or support. But you have fully able-bodied people thinking that you're just taking advantage and you're trying to get away with a lot more."

Building disability confidence in organizations

Addressing stigma and discrimination in the workplace requires building "disability confidence" within and across organizations. We use the definition of organizational confidence developed by the Disability Inclusion Business Council, which defines disability confidence as "employers that can confidently attract, recruit, and retain people with disabilities."[1]

Our research suggests that employers lack disability confidence, with organizational representatives openly acknowledging their challenges in fostering inclusive work environments for people with disabilities. As one HR leader we interviewed admitted, "We lack confidence in working with people with disabilities, due to inexperience."

This lack of confidence was echoed in our employer survey, where 61 organizations included comments about their current challenges with disability inclusion. Nearly one in three organizations struggle to understand what qualifies as a disability, what reasonable accommodation is, and how to create effective workplace accommodation policies and procedures. (See Table 1.)

An HR practitioner in our survey noted, "We don't understand the specific barriers faced by people with disabilities or how to appropriately address them in the workplace."

Employers also reported that limited understanding of how to support employees with disabilities (29.5 per cent) and how to foster accessibility (16.4 per cent) are key challenges that hinder disability inclusion. Several indicated a need for concrete provincial or federal frameworks or practical accessibility tools (11.5 per cent) to guide their disability inclusion initiatives and strategies.

Table 1
One in three employers report challenges with understanding accommodation requirements
Q: What are the most pressing challenges or knowledge gaps that your company is facing regarding disability inclusion in your workplace?
(n = 61; per cent)

Accommodations (e.g., requirements, benefits)	29.5
Knowledge gaps (access to experts, barriers)	19.7
Accessibility (i.e., digital, physical)	16.4
Awareness	16.4
Recruiting strategies	11.5
Frameworks and resources	11.5
Facilitating disclosure	9.8
Working within business needs	9.8
Promoting inclusivity	8.2
Neurodivergence	6.6
Stigma	6.6
Training	6.6
Data collection and measurement	4.9
Visible vs invisible disability	4.9
Job suitability	4.9
Discrimination	4.9

Notes: Total is greater than 100 as more than one theme may have emerged within an organization's response.
Four cases were removed during data cleaning (i.e., N/A, unsure).
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

1   Canada, "Bridging the Gap—Report on Disability Inclusion in Canadian Workplaces."

The impact of knowledge gaps on disability inclusion in the workplace

One in five employers (19.7 per cent) indicated that knowledge gaps limit their organization's disability inclusion initiatives. These gaps are compounded by limited access to trained experts who can identify and remove barriers for individuals with disabilities as well as provide practical, evidence-based strategies for supporting them in the workplace. One DEI leader shared, "We have limited access to experts, at times, which can cause challenges in fully understanding accommodation requirements." Accessibility experts play a crucial role in conducting accessibility audits, ensuring compliance with legal requirements and developing policies, practices, and strategies designed to create more-accessible workplaces. These valuable resources can be internal or external to an organization and typically specialize in specific areas related to accessibility or workplace accommodation (e.g., legal compliance or auditing).

Gaps in employer knowledge have not gone unnoticed by employees. Challenges in accessing appropriate accommodations were echoed in our employee experience survey, with employees highlighting concerns including lengthy approval processes (26.9 per cent), perceptions that employers don't know how to conduct the process (25.6 per cent), and insufficient communication from employers (20.9 per cent). (See Chart 1.)

Fostering an inclusive environment where all employees are knowledgeable about disability-related issues can help organizations build confidence in accommodating employees with disabilities. It can also equip leaders to be confident in effectively providing accommodations and supporting colleagues with disabilities.
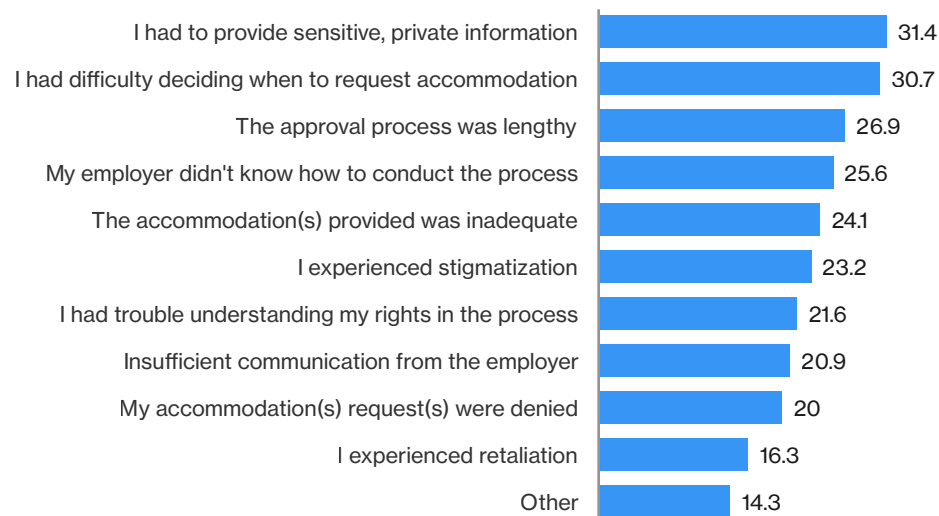
By examining workplace policies, talent management practices, and leadership behaviours so they are responsive to diverse learning and to social and communication preferences and needs, organizations can help to foster workplace inclusion and to decrease knowledge gaps.[2]

Chart 1
One in four employees identified employer knowledge gaps as a challenge
Q: What were the main challenges you faced when asking for accommodations from your employer or potential employers?
(n = 449; per cent)

I had to provide sensitive, private information	31.4
I had difficulty deciding when to request accommodation	30.7
The approval process was lengthy	26.9
My employer didn't know how to conduct the process	25.6
The accommodation(s) provided was inadequate	24.1
I experienced stigmatization	23.2
I had trouble understanding my rights in the process	21.6
Insufficient communication from the employer	20.9
My accommodation(s) request(s) were denied	20
I experienced retaliation	16.3
Other	14.3

Note: The total is greater than 100 because survey respondents could select more than one reason.
Source: The Conference Board of Canada, 2025.

2   Hutchison, *Breaking Down Barriers*.

Employees hesitate to disclose

Disclosure is a personal choice; however, our findings suggest that some individuals hesitate to disclose, even when they would directly benefit from support and accommodation to do their job. Reducing stigma is crucial for removing barriers to disclosure, ultimately fostering more-accessible workplaces.
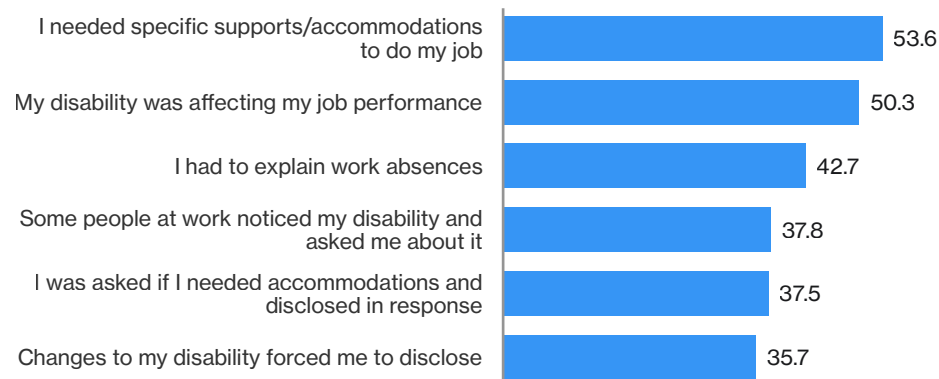
Stigma impacts employee decisions on disclosing their disabilities at work, with nearly one in three employees believing that disclosing would lead to discrimination (29.6 per cent) or limit future opportunities (32.6 per cent). The impact of stigma is perceived to be much higher for job applicants, with nearly two in three suggesting that disclosing wouldn't help them (69.2 per cent), would negatively affect evaluations (68.4 per cent), or would prevent them from getting the job (69.2 per cent).

Nearly one in 10 employers in our employer survey reported that disclosure is a challenge for fostering disability inclusion at work. One employer indicated that it is challenging to create "a psychologically safe space for people with disabilities to disclose." Another stated that "employees are not disclosing proactively, even when asked to reach out privately to HR, unless a situation happens or when it's too late." This last sentiment aligns with our survey research, which suggests that employees with disabilities often disclose only when necessary—to request accommodation (53.6 per cent), to explain performance issues (50.3 per cent), or to account for absences (42.7 per cent). (See Chart 2.)

Chart 2
Most respondents only disclosed their disability when they had no other choice
Q: Did any of the situations listed below play a part in your decision to disclose to your employer?
(n=384; per cent)

I needed specific supports/accommodations to do my job	53.6
My disability was affecting my job performance	50.3
I had to explain work absences	42.7
Some people at work noticed my disability and asked me about it	37.8
I was asked if I needed accommodations and disclosed in response	37.5
Changes to my disability forced me to disclose	35.7

Note: The total is greater than 100 because survey respondents could select more than one reason.
Source: The Conference Board of Canada, 2025.

Varying experiences: Apparent vs. non-apparent disabilities

Individuals who have non-apparent disabilities reported more difficulty in accessing accommodation and increased experiences of disability-related stigma than those who have apparent disabilities. This finding is consistent with a 2025 study on behavioural tendencies, which identified that individuals with non-apparent disabilities experience higher levels of prejudice than those with visible disabilities.[3] This has implications for how employees with disabilities are perceived and treated when requesting accommodation. Standard accommodation and disclosure processes often treat all employees with disabilities as a homogeneous group, overlooking their unique needs and abilities. Training managers on their legal obligations to accommodate those living with both apparent and non-apparent disabilities is crucial for HR leaders as it helps to reduce workplace stigma for those with non-apparent disabilities.

Our 2024 research suggests that neurodivergent individuals, such as those who experience autism, ADHD, or learning disabilities—identities that are generally non-apparent to others—also report high levels of stigma in workplace settings. Due to experiences of stigma, around 50 per cent of neurodivergent Canadian workers choose not to disclose.[4] Ongoing workplace stigma highlights the need for new stigma-reduction strategies to mitigate the negative impact on the well-being of employees with disabilities, especially those with non-apparent disabilities.[5]

In their own words

"One of the reasons why this is easy for me in some ways is people automatically accept my disabilities as valid, like the second that I say I get all these migraines because I have [an apparent disability]. It's like the red carpet rolls out. It's like, 'we believe you, take the time off.'"

---

3 Granjon et al., "Attitudes towards Invisible Disabilities."

4 Robertson and Hutchison, "Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive."

5 Serpas et al., "Ableist Microaggressions and Psychological Distress among Adults with Disabilities."

Tackling stigma in the workplace

Employers who wish to create workplaces that are inclusive for people with disabilities can implement the following actions:

Ensure that workplace accommodation policies are clear, easy to understand, and accessible. These resources should be easy to access, should outline employer/employee obligations for accessing workplace accommodations, and be available in accessible formats (e.g., be compatible with screen readers, written in plain language, etc.).

Engage leaders in conducting regular (at least annual) open, honest, and respectful conversations with all employees about disability inclusion. These conversations should focus on how the organization is working to create a more inclusive workplace culture by identifying successes and highlighting where progress can be made. These conversations should also provide details regarding how to access accommodations and workplace supports for all employees, whether or not they have disclosed a disability.

Train all people leaders on how they can support employees with disabilities by ensuring they are equipped to understand and navigate organizational accommodation processes. Training topics should include: how to appropriately address accommodation requests; understanding the employer's legal obligations to accommodate; how to access resources for these requests; how to accommodate the unique needs and abilities of employees; and how to address and understand the role of stigma.

Provide all employees with training that enhances their understanding of disability. To build disability confidence and reduce workplace stigma, human resources (DEI teams) and senior leadership can implement training programs that address:

- Disability awareness,
- Disability etiquette,
- Duty to accommodate,
- Terminology preferences, including person-first and identity-first language (e.g., used by blind or autistic individuals),
- Accessible training resources, such as those available through the Canadian Association for Supported Employment, Inclusive Design for Employment Access, The Inclusive Workplace, and the Ontario Disability Employment Network.

Reduce the need for disclosure by enhancing overall workplace accessibility through proactive employee supports. Employers can create more-accessible workplaces by applying an accessibility lens to job analysis and regularly seeking employee input on support needs. Providing key supports to all employees reduces reliance on disclosure and fosters a more inclusive environment. Our research participants highlighted several low- or no-cost proactive supports, including flexible work arrangements, adjusted lighting, noise-cancelling headphones, screen readers, and time off for appointments.

Want to learn more? Check out our additional research on fostering disability inclusive workplaces

Supporting Employees with Disabilities: Key Insights on Disclosure and Accommodations

From Compliance to Culture: Accessibility Beyond Disclosure

Fostering Inclusion through Mentorship: A Call to Action From People With Disabilities

Build Diverse Workforces: Strategies and Tools for Inclusive Mentorship

Empowering Inclusion in the Workforce: Mentorship Program Toolkit for Employers

Opportunity for All: Improving Workplace Experiences and Career Outcomes for Canadians With Disabilities

Building Workplaces Where Neurodiverse Workers Thrive

Methodology

About the research

We conducted two phases of research (Phases 1 and 2) and a final phase for comprehensive reporting on the quantitative and qualitative data (Phase 4). Phase 3 (not depicted in this briefing) focused on disseminating the research findings using presentations and webinars to external stakeholders.

In Phase 1, we conducted a survey focused on the experiences of working-age adults with disabilities. Our survey gathered data on disability disclosure, past experiences with accommodation requests and mentoring, as well as standard demographic information (e.g., gender, age, province). We used the following research question to guide the study:

1. From the perspectives of persons with disabilities, what are the current facilitators and barriers to disability disclosure in the workplace?

We followed Phase 1 with a qualitative-focused Phase 2. We conducted interviews and roundtables with employers, as well as interviews with mentors and mentees with lived experience of disability. We used the following research questions to guide Phase 2:

1. What are the key features of mentoring initiatives that effectively foster disability inclusion within organizations?
2. What challenges do mentors and mentees with disabilities face in company-sponsored mentoring programs?
3. How can organizations effectively implement mentoring initiatives for disability inclusion?

This briefing will supplement existing data from CASE Phases 1 and 2, with a comprehensive literature review of stigma for people with disabilities in the workplace, and will explore multiple mechanisms aimed at tackling discrimination and stigma (e.g., disability awareness training, mentoring). Our inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature review are as follows:

Inclusion criteria
- The study must focus on people with disabilities (apparent or non-apparent disabilities) in the context of employment or workplace settings.
- It must be relevant to Canadian workplaces (i.e., be comprised entirely or partially of a Canadian sample) or offer transferable insights to the Canadian context, such as a study within a country with comparable human rights frameworks.
- Articles that explore the concepts of workplace-related stigma or bias related to disability (e.g., physical, procedural, or attitudinal barriers) will be included to form the theoretical understanding of this paper.
- Academic articles (primarily open-source peer-reviewed articles) and publicly available grey literature (white papers, policy/consultancies/advocacy briefs/reports).
- It must be available in English.
- The full text must be accessible for review.
- It must be published within the last four years, unless seminal to our topic.

Exclusion criteria
- Research that does not address our study population or that does so in a superficial manner (as part of other equity-deserving groups).
- Research conducted outside a workplace setting (e.g., education, healthcare), unless the study specifically links back to employment outcomes.
- Studies conducted using non-Canadian samples or in countries with vastly different human rights frameworks or workplace norms.
- Non-empirical sources, such as news articles, blog posts, opinion pieces, or social media commentary. We also excluded book chapters as they were usually not publicly available.
- Duplicate versions of the studies identified in our inclusion criteria are also excluded.

We examined 52 articles and nine were included in this review.

Detailed methods

Phase 1

Employee survey

Our Phase 1 survey was developed based on findings from our literature review on disability disclosure in the workplace. Questions were reviewed by both the Canadian Association for Supported Employment and the Research Advisory Board for the project.

The online survey was open from December 17, 2024, to January 9, 2025. The survey was administered to a nationally representative sample of 1,000 working-age adults with disabilities. Quotas were established based on a representative segmentation of age, region, and gender. Participants were recruited by the panel research company Leger.

The research team conducted, in partnership with Leger, a pre-test of the survey with 30 participants before fielding the survey to ensure its external validity, identifying any language or accessibility issues. After data collection was completed, the overall quality of the responses were analyzed. As a result, responses from 10 participants were excluded and new respondents were recruited to reach the target sample number.

Since the survey was administered by a panel company using a non-random sample, this survey cannot be considered a random probability sample. Therefore, a margin of error cannot be applied to this data set. Due to the study's non-random design, generalizations about workplace stigma in Canada cannot be made to the study population.

All data was analyzed using R and SPSS software programs. Analysis for this issue briefing focused on descriptive statistics obtained from survey responses.

Employer survey

Between May and June of 2024, we and the Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE) sent a survey to their networks of employers to gather information on disability inclusion and mentoring practices within Canadian workplaces. In total, a non-random sample of 100 organizations responded to the survey.

All data was analyzed using R and SPSS. Power BI was used to create dashboard visuals. Data analyses included, but were not limited to:

- Analysis of descriptive statistics
- Group mean difference testing (e.g., independent samples t-test, ANOVA)

Phase 2

Interview guides

The interview and facilitation guides were developed based on the existing disability studies literature. The final guides can be found by clicking on the below links.

1. Employer guide
2. Mentor guide
3. Mentee guide
4. Roundtable guide

To answer the research questions, the guides focused on understanding:

- The perspectives, experiences, and needs of Canadian workers with disabilities and their employers
- The development of more effective workplace tools and supports aimed at enhancing employment inclusion for those experiencing disability, with an emphasis on mentoring programs
- Perceptions of policies or practices that would enhance workplace inclusivity in Canada
- Employer insights on organizational diversity-focused mentorship programs, policies, procedures, and best practices

The guides underwent the Research Ethics Review process. All interviewees and roundtable participants were guaranteed confidentiality.

Qualitative data collection

We conducted interviews with 15 mentors and 15 mentees. Based on the community's composition, this identified list provided sufficient coverage of experiences of mentors and mentees with disabilities in mentorship programs. Mentors were not required to have a disability to participate in this study, while mentees were required to have a disability to participate in this research to capture their lived experience.

Mentee and mentor interviews
Within one week of receiving Phase 1 survey data, we created a list of participants who had consented to be contacted for future research. Participants were emailed and asked to schedule virtual interviews with a member of the research team through an Outlook booking link that was attached within the outreach email. Consent forms were sent to participants once they scheduled an interview or expressed interest in providing a written response. Of the 125 approached, 34 accepted invitations to be interviewed. The response rate was 27.2 per cent.

The final sample of 15 mentor and 15 mentee interviews was obtained through turnover, such as interviewee dropouts (n=3) and exclusion due to inadequate quality data (n=1). This sample was collected from January 10 to January 31, 2025, using Microsoft Teams and Outlook for written responses. One interview was collected on February 13, 2025, due to an earlier dropout. Twelve rounds of follow-up with various sized groups were conducted between January 16 and January 28 to recruit female participants and increase the number of participants with experience as mentors. A total of 424 pages of cleaned transcripts were collected.

The participants were skewed toward men (56.7 per cent), particularly men closer to the retirement age. Female participants made up a smaller proportion of the overall sample (33.3 per cent) and were younger on average (42.6 versus 50.4 years old). Most participants (48.1 per cent) reported residing in Ontario, followed by British Columbia (25.9 per cent), Alberta (11.1 per cent), Quebec (7.4 per cent), New Brunswick (3.6 per cent), and Nova Scotia (3.7 per cent).

Qualitative analysis
Overall, 424 pages of cleaned transcripts were collected from the interviews with mentors and mentees. The text was coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Coding themes were developed inductively, where codes were created as the data was analyzed. Respondents' themes were examined based on how frequently they were noted as well as the intensity of the observation. Due to the small sample size, we cannot generalize to the wider population of Canadians who experience disability.

Appendix B
Glossary

Mentoring is defined by CASE as a relationship between a mentor and a mentee who are tied to a specific context, such as employment or education.[1]

Mentors empower and support their mentees by sharing insights, offering guidance, and exchanging knowledge. Our research underscores that mentors act as collaborative partners, helping mentees navigate different aspects of their lives while fostering growth in skills, knowledge, and confidence.[2] Through this collaborative and reciprocal relationship, mentors also gain valuable skills (e.g., leadership, communication), further broaden their knowledge, and expand their networks.

Mentees engage in mentoring relationships to co-create their journeys with their mentors as partners. As part of shaping their paths, mentees take an active role in discussing and planning their goals in a self-directed way, rather than following the explicit direction of a more experienced individual.[3]

Workplace mentorship takes place between a mentee and a mentor, in workplace settings, for the purpose of the professional and personal development of the mentee.

Mentoring relationships are continuous, personal, professional, and reciprocal relationships between mentors and mentees.

Self-advocacy is a skill that persons with disabilities learn and foster in order to articulate their needs within the workplace.

Appendix C
Bibliography

Canada, Employment and Social Development. "Bridging the Gap – Report on Disability Inclusion in Canadian Workplaces." Research. November 25, 2024. https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/disability-inclusion-business-council/report-bridging-gap.html.

Canadian Association for Supported Employment and Mentor Canada. *Mentoring for Persons Experiencing Disabilities: A Review of the Literature*. Canadian Association for Supported Employment, 2024. https://www.supportedemployment.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Mentoring-for-persons-experiencing-disability.pdf.

Conference Board of Canada, The. *Fostering Inclusion for People With Disability Through Mentorship: A Call to Action*. 2025.

Granjon, Marine, Nicolas Pillaud, Maria Popa-Roch, Benoite Aubé, and Odile Rohmer. "Attitudes towards Invisible Disabilities: Evidence from Behavioral Tendencies." *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences* 8 (2025): 100164. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2024.100164.

Hutchison, Jane. *Breaking Down Barriers: Improving the Workplace Experience for Neurodivergent Canadians*. The Conference Board of Canada, 2023. https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/breaking-down-barriers/.

Jennerdene L. Rubbi Nunan, Aysha B. Ebrahim, and Marius W. Stander. "Mentoring in the Workplace: Exploring the Experiences of Mentor–Mentee Relations." Original Research. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* (Auckland Park, South Africa) 49 (2023). https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v49i0.2067.

Robertson, Beth A., and Jane Hutchison. *Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive*. The Conference Board of Canada, 2022. https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/building-workplaces-where-neurodivergent-workers-thrive-2/.

Serpas, Dylan G., Daniel A. Ignacio, Kemesha Gabbidon, and Barbara J. Cherry. "Ableist Microaggressions and Psychological Distress among Adults with Disabilities: The Role of Disability Visibility." Rehabilitation Psychology 70, no. 3 (2025): 267–77. https://doi.org/10.1037/rep0000582.

---

1   Canadian Association for Supported Employment and Mentor Canada, *Mentoring for Persons Experiencing Disabilities: A Review of the Literature*.
2   Conference Board of Canada, The, *Fostering Inclusion for People With Disability*.
3   Jennerdene L. Rubbi Nunan et al., "Mentoring in the Workplace."

Acknowledgements

Overcoming Stigma and Discrimination: Inclusive Strategies for Supporting People With Disabilities
Tyler DeMelo, Lindsay Coffin, and Diogo Borba

The Conference Board of Canada

Where insights meet impact

The Conference Board of Canada

conferenceboard.ca