



UNTAPPED TALENT: WHY ACCESSIBILITY IS CANADA'S NEXT COMPETITIVENESS STRATEGY

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Canada is leaving billions of dollars in GDP on the table every year by sidelining one of its biggest sources of talent: Canadians with disabilities.

Canadians with disabilities participate in the workforce up to 15 percentage points less than their non-disabled peers, even with post-secondary credentials. This underrepresentation endures amid Canada's worsening skills shortages and slowing productivity.

We can't afford to leave this talent untapped – not just for social reasons, but for Canada's competitiveness. Improving access to work isn't an act of goodwill: it's a workforce strategy. And like any strategy that drives productivity, it deserves the same urgency and investment as AI, clean tech, or infrastructure.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD

Employers want to hire inclusively, but they face systems that make it unnecessarily hard to act.

Many employers aren't resisting accessibility. They're just navigating without a map. Accessibility standards often describe what needs to happen but leave out the how, offering vague principles without practical tools. That forces business leaders to become de facto accessibility experts while still running their organizations, which disproportionately affects small and mid-sized enterprises that lack internal HR capacity or legal teams.

At the same time, the supports that do exist are fragmented.

Post-secondary institutions bring deep disability expertise, community reach, and dedicated student services. Businesses – particularly larger ones – may have their own guidelines and good practices. But too often, these resources live in silos, disconnected from each other and inaccessible to the majority of employers.

This fragmentation wastes time, resources, and momentum.

It also leaves billions of dollars in growth untapped. [TD Economics](#) estimated that narrowing the employment gap for Canadians with disabilities could create 450,000 new jobs by 2030 and add \$50 billion to GDP. [The Institute for Work & Health](#) projected that a fully inclusive workforce could yield benefits worth \$253 billion to \$423 billion – the equivalent of 13% to 22% of Canada's GDP.

The cost of inaction for individual companies is high too, not only in missed inclusion goals, but in lost economic growth.

According to [Accenture](#), companies leading in disability inclusion report 1.6 times more revenue and 2.6 times more net income than their peers. Beyond financial returns, employees with disabilities contribute unique perspectives and problem-solving skills that drive innovation, adaptability, and market reach.

CALLING ON LEADERS

If Canada is serious about solving its productivity crisis and closing its skills gaps, leaders in business, higher education, and government must treat accessibility as a core element of economic strategy. This means moving beyond statements of intent, toward coordinated, systems-level action.

Treat accessibility like infrastructure, not altruism.

We don't question the value of investing in AI, clean tech, or transportation networks to keep Canada competitive. Accessibility demands the same mindset: a long-term, non-negotiable investment embedded in career education, recruitment, onboarding, and workplace design. This is about building the scaffolding that will support inclusive growth for decades.

Standardize the “how” for employers.

No CEO should have to start from scratch to figure out accessibility. We need clear, practical employment standards – as straightforward as workplace safety or minimum wage guidelines – paired with ready-to-use tools and freely available resources. That’s especially critical for SMEs, which make up the majority of Canadian employers and often lack dedicated accessibility expertise.

Use post-secondaries as a force multiplier.

Higher education institutions are natural hubs for inclusion: they have the disability expertise, student connections, and community reach to bridge the gap between employers and untapped talent. By centralizing accessible WIL programs, creating networks of employers on the accessibility journey, and supporting digital transformation, they can multiply the impact of every accessibility initiative.

Empower talent through better skills signalling.

Our current tools for articulating and assessing skills weren’t designed with disability inclusion in mind. Updating these frameworks will allow graduates with disabilities to showcase their competencies clearly, while helping employers evaluate them without bias to make hiring decisions based on capability, not assumption.

There has been progress. **Statistics Canada** found that the employment gap between Canadians with and without disabilities narrowed from 20.8 percentage points in 2017 to 16 points in 2022. But the gains were fragile. In 2024, **overall employment rates declined**, with youth with disabilities experiencing the steepest drop. Now is the time to secure and build upon those gains, or we’ll lose them.

The leaders who act now will unlock one of Canada’s largest untapped sources of talent, fueling productivity, innovation, and long-term growth. Those who delay risk being left behind in a global economy that is already moving toward full workforce inclusion, missing the chance to turn potential into competitive advantage.

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