EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite Alberta having a strong economy and suffering from chronic labour shortages, an entire population is being passed over for employment as a result of misconceptions that have been unaddressed for many years. Individuals with intellectual disabilities struggle to find meaningful employment. Although numerous studies indicate individuals with intellectual disabilities benefit from employment, no research appears to have been done on the benefits of inclusive hiring to the work environment; specifically, workplace well-being and culture. We set out to find supporting evidence to demonstrate to employers that hiring inclusively is not about charity, but that it brings lasting contributions to the organization and overall workplace culture.

Our research, which involved interviews with staff from 5 Edmonton and area businesses that are known to hire inclusively, looked at what inclusive hiring means to each organization, the benefits, the hurdles, and the overall impact. The result of these interviews revealed consistent evidence that supports our claim that inclusive hiring positively impacts businesses.

Five main themes emerged from our research. The first was around the definition of accommodation in relation to employees without a disability. The second was a general misconception that substantial investment is needed in training and supervision. The third was around hurdles faced by individuals seeking employment being societal preconceptions and myths around inclusive hiring. The fourth was an acknowledgement about the benefits to workplace culture and the fifth was around general benefits to inclusive hiring.

As a result of our research, we are confident that our evidence supports our claim that inclusive hiring benefits more than just the employee, the investment is less than most employers anticipate, and the benefits go far beyond what most organizations hope for. This research supports the idea that traditional approaches to job coaching may be misguided and that future policies should be built around raising awareness and eliminating misconceptions of inclusive employment. At Gateway, we will use this research to mentor employers and act as consultants to inspire more businesses to hire inclusively.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Objective(s)

The intent of this project was to:

1. Investigate the perceived Well-Being and Workplace Culture of organizations that employ people with intellectual disabilities.
2. Determine what employees with intellectual disabilities bring to the workplace culture and how those employees affect the bottom line.
3. Develop resources based on study results to promote the benefits of hiring people with intellectual disabilities and, when requested, mentor or consult with employers to support businesses in doing so.

Background

People with intellectual disabilities are vastly unemployed and underutilized in the workforce in Canada (Crawford, 2011). The Canadian Association for Community Living (2011) reported that the employment rate for people with developmental disabilities in Canada is only about 25%–30%. The Participation and Activity Limitation Survey [PALS] 2006 (as cited in Crawford, 2011) revealed that "people with intellectual disabilities are 6 times more likely than others to have never worked" and that "39.0% have never worked." (p. ii). The majority of people with intellectual disabilities want to work, yet often we hear of a shortage of skilled labour and human resource crises in Alberta.
The working sector is diverse in terms of culture, age, and experience, yet there seems to be a knowledge gap with regard to the mental well-being of the workplace when it is complemented with diversity, specifically the employment of people with intellectual disabilities. This population is often misunderstood and underutilized. The costs of hiring and making accommodations for people with intellectual disabilities, although actually much less expensive than perceived (68% of job accommodations cost less than $500.00; Saab & Gamble, 2003), prevent many employers from hiring inclusively. This, coupled with a lack of understanding and support, can make it appear “not worth it” to hire someone with an intellectual disability.

Currently, no specific service educates and supports companies in hiring persons with intellectual disabilities, although there are many supports geared for people with intellectual disabilities who are seeking employment. By design, these supports often result in a reliance on them, instead of fostering the use of built in supports within the workplace. Hagner (2000) suggested that some supports can actually facilitate social distancing rather than inclusion.

**Approach and Methods**

Our intent was for the research to be collaborative and community based. We partnered with a University of Alberta Faculty of Business student and a Grant MacEwan University Management Studies student who identified companies that hire inclusively and initiated the first meetings with those employers. Using a narrative approach and qualitative methodology tools, we conducted face-to-face individual interviews (approximately one hour in length), with an employee with intellectual disabilities, his or her manager, and a coworker from each of five different businesses and organizations that have a reputation for inclusive hiring practices. The organizations we chose are diverse in their industries: oil and gas, a restaurant, retail, human services, and a school. We attempted to conduct one focus group over the summer, but after having to change the date five times over a period of three months, we realized that the employers were too busy at this time to attend the focus group so we opted to go ahead with just the face-to-face interviews. We selected businesses that have a reputation for inclusive hiring practices, currently employ people with intellectual disabilities at appropriate wages, and are not minimum-wage exempted. During the process, one of the businesses had a staffing change, but the former employees agreed to honour their commitment to meet with us.

We based the face-to-face interview questions on those in The Workplace Culture Survey (see Appendix I) (Hagner, 2000), and we collected the data from the interviews by using an audio recorder, then transcribed the recordings and examined the transcripts for themes.

**Key Findings**

After conducting the 15 face-to-face interviews, we transcribed and themed the data. Five themes emerged as the most significant: accommodations, training and supervision, hurdles, culture, and the clear benefits of hiring persons with an intellectual disability. For confidentiality reasons we refer to the participants in the study as Employer A, B, C, D, and E; employees with an intellectual disability as Employee A, B, C, D, and E; and Coworker A, B, C, D, and E.

1. **Accommodations**

   The theme of accommodations was the most salient of all the themes. The Canadian Human Rights Act, the Employment Equity Act, and legislation called the Duty to Accommodate (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2010) obligates employers to take steps to eliminate barriers that result from rules, practice, or physical barriers to employees. The act ensures that employers will respect employees’ various needs related to their gender, age, disability, family or marital status, cultural or ethnic origin, religion, or other attributes defined in the act and provide whatever is necessary (without causing undue hardship to themselves) to allow their employees to do their jobs to the best of their abilities.

   It is interesting that three of five employers (60%) whom we interviewed affirmed that they accommodate all of their employees (with or without disability) and that two of those three reported
that some employees without disabilities require more accommodations than those with. The remaining two employers identified ways that they make accommodations for employees with intellectual disabilities but did not view similar supports for other employees, such as scheduling changes, allowing pets being brought to work, and allowances for medical conditions, as making accommodations. Coworker A reported that “my coworkers with intellectual disabilities bring new insight into how to accommodate all employees at [our organization].”

Based on our limited research, most employers acknowledged that they make allowances for the unique needs of all their employees, however, the word “accommodate” was typically only used when referring to employees with intellectual disabilities. Coworker A put it, “There is a stigma and many barriers that come with being labeled with a developmental disability.”

2. Training and Supervision

Training, mentorship, and supervision was another prominent theme in the interviews. While most current research has focused on providing training and job coaching to people with intellectual disabilities, an identified gap (Interagency Committee on Disability Research, Interagency Subcommittee on Employment, 2006) is the need to train managers and supervisors on disability awareness.

Employers A, C, and E (60%) affirmed that they provide different training; Employers D and B (40%) noted that they provide more training, and Employers C and E reported that they provided less extensive training for their employees with intellectual disabilities than for employees without an intellectual disability. Employer B contended that it does not make sense to “skip on training,” because without adequate training his employees with intellectual disabilities would be only “figureheads.”

There were many variations as to how job coaches, and their effectiveness, were viewed by the interviewees. One employer spoke to job coaches “getting in the way,” and others commented on how they could be more effective by facilitating the initial process to help employees with intellectual disabilities “convey their strength” and “get in the door” and potentially assist with initial training but let the employer handle the rest. In the National Employer Survey conducted by the Association of People Supporting Employment First (Hoff, 2011), “the majority of employers (51%) viewed service providers [who provide employment support] as only somewhat effective, while 11% saw them as not effective at all” (p. 1). Yet, coworker E commented that she felt it should be the job coaches who provided any extra assistance needed, like tying an apron, or help with a time clock. Interestingly, all of the employees with intellectual disabilities whom we interviewed were working without job coaches.

Four of the five employers (80%) talked about mentoring new employees, and one employee (20%) spoke of being mentored in the workplace. Based on our limited research, a culture of having experienced staff mentor employees with intellectual disabilities seems to enhance the employment experience for all coworkers.

Employer E addressed the importance of their corporate value of embracing diversity and being able to provide disability awareness training to her staff. More than just a statement, this value permeates the organizations, is all encompassing, and is demonstrated in everyday situations. She expressed that these values are noticed and appreciated by the customer, as well as contributing to the positive culture of the workplace. Employer D realized that offering the proper training, ensuring a culture of caring, and valuing diversity positively affect retention, which in turn affects the company’s bottom line.

3. Hurdles

Clearly, the employment hurdle for all people with intellectual disabilities that the employers and coworkers identified most often is perceptions and myths: “Systems and paternalistic attitudes” (Employer A) are the biggest barriers; “It is difficult for some [employers] to get past their own preconceptions” (Employer B); “[The biggest hurdles] are bosses: how they come across and their attitude towards working [with people with intellectual disabilities]” (Employer C); “First of all, people
are uncomfortable with what they do not know. They are not sure what is involved, and so they don't do it” (Employer D); and “The biggest hurdle is the perception that it will be way too much work, effort, and time” (Employer E). The myths that need to be dispelled are that employees with intellectual disabilities are a safety risk, will have more absenteeism, and are more costly to employ (Interagency Committee on Disability Research, Interagency Subcommittee on Employment, 2006).

During our research we saw a first-hand example of how attitudes and myths affect the employment of people with intellectual disabilities. One of our employers left his position during the summer months, and a new supervisor was hired for the fall. The new supervisor laid-off the employee with an intellectual disability, who had been employed with them for five years. Fortunately the former employer agreed to fulfill his commitment to be interviewed and confided that he had considered the employee with an intellectual disability valuable to the company and that the employee brought much more to company than just the tasks he performed. The new supervisor had not even worked with the employee before he was laid off. The employee was sad about being laid off and missed his co-worker and the environment he had worked in. The layoff impacted him both financially and emotionally.

4. Culture

Hatch (1993, as cited in Hagner, 2000) defined culture as a set of shared meanings, expectations, values, and assumptions that govern what goes on in the workplace and how it is interpreted. Furthermore, “workplace culture refers to the aspect of culture that is unique to one specific setting” (p. 3).

Some of the employers we interviewed powerfully emphasized the importance of workplace culture. Employer D asserted that it is the most important aspect of retaining good employees; Employer C said, “It brings the whole group together as a family. . . . [Culture] is huge . . . huge; it is really huge. The values and culture are what keep the [place] together.” Employer B responded emphatically to a question about the importance of workplace culture to a company: “Probably everything.” It is interesting that Employee B said that he is willing to help wherever necessary and that he would do anything for his company. Coworker A commented, “We have a very supportive culture. . . . We all come with our own idiosyncrasies, abilities, disabilities, and we all support each other to learn to understand each other well enough that we are all better able to integrate.”

Employer A explained that “[the culture here] is the one thing that keeps people coming in on a Monday morning. Culture is what you offer when you don't have a lot to offer in terms of benefits or great wages.” According to Employer E, “It is important to have the culture and right fit of people.” This employer noted that his company’s culture is based on values that ensures that employees with intellectual disabilities or other diverse qualities fit in and that they have created this culture with effort: “It is more than a poster on the wall.” Employee E said, “My coworkers . . . make my day, and they say the same about me: . . . I make their day!” Her coworker said, “[Employee E] makes us cry with gratitude. She is not shy about saying how happy she is to work here and how much working means to her. It is touching. . . . Culture is so important!” Finally, Employer D emphasized that “it is possibly number one. We do not have the best-paying jobs in the world or the best jobs; in fact, they are pretty crappy. Everyone, all eighty people who work here, work here because they like the company.”

Hagner, (2002) suggests that inclusion in the culture of an organization is very important to successful employment. He quotes Kennedy (1980) in saying “that only about 25% of people who had a job loss failed because of not being able to perform the job tasks, The other 75%...because they never became included in the culture’ (p.6) . Our research demonstrates that employees with intellectual disabilities enhance workplace culture. As we have shown, not only do employees with intellectual disabilities fit into the culture, but they also bring people together and positively influence the workplace culture.
5. **Benefits of Hiring a Person with an Intellectual Disability**

Some research has revealed the benefits to employers of hiring employees with intellectual disabilities (Hartnett et al., 2011; Interagency Committee on Disability Research, Interagency Subcommittee on Employment, 2006; Irvine & Lupart, 2008; Kregel, 1999; Wilkerson, 2001). Some of these benefits are low employee turnover rates, dedicated and reliable employees, an increased ability to contend with competitors (Kregel, 1999), increased efficiency, increased awareness, the positive role modeling of employees with disabilities, and increased morale (Irvine & Lupart, 2008).

The employers we interviewed confirmed the findings from the literature and added a few insights. Employer D commented:

*The main advantage for us [is that] we can get someone for what we pay [Employee D]. . . . It is a huge benefit for us. Employee D is reliable, never late, misses very few days. Hiring inclusively is a win/win for this organization.*

Employer C stated that hiring an employee with intellectual disabilities has helped to bring her whole team together. Coworker C said that [Employee C] knows his job and does it very well. Employee C told us that he helps wherever he can. Employer B credited an employee with creating an awareness of difference and an appreciation that everyone has gifts to offer to his coworkers, company and the people they serve. Employer B proudly talked about the times that Employee B went above and beyond his job duties, on his own time, for the company. Employer A echoed the benefits of hiring inclusively that the literature identified: “Reliability, commitment, low turnover, results, work is getting done, perspective, adds to the culture, adds to the laughter, and keeps us grounded.” Employee A reported that she has called in sick only once in nearly three years of employment and that she has often taken shifts when other employees could not come in. Employer E stressed that:

*Everyone can learn to be more accepting and appreciate everyone’s differences and learn what everyone has to offer and contribute. [Employee E] brings a positive attitude for everyone . . . and everyone wants to go above and beyond to make her feel welcome. That helps everyone be more appreciative.*

Employee E said with pride, “*The happiest day in my life was the day I got this job. . . . I spend a lot of time making sure things are neat and tidy; that is my job!*” From our research it is clear that employers who hire inclusively do so because they understand the benefits and not because it is a charitable thing to do.

**Conclusions**

The questions that drove this research are:

- What is the perceived workplace culture and wellbeing of organizations that employ people with intellectual disabilities?
- What do employees with intellectual disabilities add to the workplace culture?
- How do these employees affect the bottom line?

The employers whom we interviewed believed that employing individuals with intellectual disabilities creates a positive work ethic in the organization, it is in itself an endorsement of the employer’s commitment to the social well-being of the community, it helps the organization to gain the trust of all employees, and it shows that the organization is not just a money-making business, but an organization that cares about its employees’ well-being. It is obvious that employing persons with intellectual disabilities is not charity; it simply makes good business sense.

The employers reported that employees with intellectual disabilities enhance the workplace culture. The employers whom we interviewed confirmed that their employees with intellectual disabilities are reliable and often motivate the other employees. The employees with intellectual disabilities whom we interviewed confirmed the importance of employment to them, especially in environments that interest them.
IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY OR PRACTICE

With a small sample size of 15 interviewees, we believe that the information we gained can be valuable to employers who want to hire inclusively but are somewhat reluctant. We have used what we have learned in the study already to educate employers on what employees with intellectual disabilities have to offer in terms of their gifts and strengths and how these gifts and talents can affect workplace culture, the work ethic, commitment, and the company’s image. As well, the findings make a good case for the benefits of employees with intellectual disabilities to the workplace culture and the bottom line.

Gateway began a pilot project in October 2012 with the intent of helping 12 job seekers with intellectual disabilities to gain and maintain employment. We used the feedback from the employers and employees we interviewed to help other employers understand the value of hiring inclusively. We will continue to use the learning from this study to educate interested employers about the advantages of hiring persons with intellectual disabilities, and we will support the job seekers in what we believe is a unique way, thereby creating awareness and ensuring successful employment for people with intellectual disabilities.

Our research indicates that traditional job coaching and employment services are not meeting the needs of employers or employees. Policy makers and decision makers can use this research most effectively by taking it into consideration when creating and modifying the models we use to provide services. Several employers made suggestions as to what they thought would be more effective and these suggestions should be taken into consideration (see Appendix II). It is also imperative that more work is done to increase awareness and eliminate the preconceptions and myths that cause barriers for individuals in finding successful employment.

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The data that we have presented are derived from a small sample size, 15 participants (3 employers, 3 employees, and 3 coworkers) from five companies. When we recruited companies, we looked for employers whom we knew hired inclusively. We initially hoped to conduct a focus group with the employers and human resource personnel, but we were required to change our methodology. We learned that time was very limited for the employers of the companies we chose to interview, and the companies generously allowed us the time to interview three employees from each company. However, a focus group was not feasible despite our best efforts because it was difficult to add another three hours to the busy days of supervisors, managers and human resource managers, and company owners. We became aware that some employers may therefore be reluctant to hire inclusively if they thought that it would take up more of their time.

Traditional job coaching and employment service delivery methods are still the most accepted form of supports, despite indications that these are no longer effective. It has become apparent that more research is needed to determine the best methods for facilitating inclusive employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities and their employers. This research could look at the true effectiveness of job coaches, and speak to those who are impacted by these services for their feedback on what works, and what could be improved. This research could become a template for innovative new service providers.

KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION AND TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES

In spite of the above mentioned limitations, we believe that the information gained in this research can be valuable to employers who want to hire inclusively but are somewhat reluctant. We have used what we have learned in the study already to educate employers on what employees with intellectual disabilities have to offer in terms of their gifts and strengths and how these gifts and talents can affect workplace culture, the work ethic, commitment, and the company image. As well, the findings make a good case for the benefits of employees with intellectual disabilities to the workplace culture and the bottom line.

As we continue to work with community organizations we will share our findings with them via conversation or formal presentation. This research will be included with Gateway Association’s own experiences around inclusive employment, and the work we are doing in our own employment initiative to
help raise awareness about inclusive employment. By having the evidence to show the intrinsic value of inclusive hiring to everyone involved, it is easier to find more organizations that are willing to take up this practice.

We will also present this information to government bodies via presentation to help provide support for our case that employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities is a good investment.

**PRINCIPAL APPLICANT (TEAM LEADER)**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position Title</th>
<th>Topics of interest</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kara Murray</td>
<td>Assistant Executive Director, Gateway Association</td>
<td>Intellectual/Developmental Disability</td>
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**PROJECT PARTNERS (TEAM MEMBERS)**

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<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Vickie Mancini</td>
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<td>Patti Schimpf</td>
<td>Director of Supports and Services, Gateway Association</td>
<td>Lead project in the absence of Kara Murray</td>
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**PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS**


**ABOUT THE ALBERTA ADDICTION AND MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM**

The *Alberta Addiction and Mental Health Research Partnership Program* is comprised of a broad-based multi-sectoral group, representing service providers, academic researchers, policy-makers and consumer groups, working together to improve the coordination and implementation of practice-based addiction and mental health research in Alberta.

The mission of the Research Partnership Program is to improve addiction and mental health outcomes for Albertans along identified research priority themes, by generating evidence and expediting its transfer into addiction and mental health promotion, prevention of mental illness, and innovative service delivery.

The Research Partnership Program sets out to increase Alberta’s excellence and output of addiction and mental health research findings, and to better translate of these findings into practice improvements.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX I
Interview Questions:

HR:
1. Do you have policies pertaining to inclusive recruiting and hiring practices?
2. Do you follow the same recruiting, hiring, orientation, training, and evaluation practices for all employees?
3. What do you think your employees with intellectual disabilities bring to workplace culture and wellbeing?
4. Have most of your employees been here a year or more?
5. Is there time during the day that employees typically socialize?
6. Are specific arrangements made within your company for older employees to mentor newer employees?
7. Is there socializing opportunities such as agency barbeques or team development activities that all employees participate in?
8. What do you think is the biggest hurdle for a person with ID in getting hired?
9. What do you think is an advantage of hiring an employee with ID?
10. What policies do the company have in handling any subtle differences and covert prejudices that arise among other employees towards an employee with ID?
11. How important is the work culture of the company in its corporate strategy and how do you think the employee with ID foster this culture?
12. Do you think there is any extra support needed for the employees with ID in getting hired and treated as any other employee and are there any incentives currently in place to offset this extra cost?
13. What is your turnover rate?
14. How long has your employee with ID been with your organization?

Co-workers:
1. What is it like to work here?
2. What do you think your co-workers with ID bring to workplace culture and wellbeing?
3. Can you tell us about some of your experiences?
4. Do you socialize at work/outside of work with your co-workers?
5. What do you think needs to happen to ensure more people with ID get hired and have a place within the culture of organizations like yours?
6. Where and when do you typically socialize?
7. How often do the employee with ID approach you for help/guidance compared to other employees?
8. What platforms do you have in the workplace for social recognition and how much do you think it accessible to employees with ID? Give any example
9. Do you think there exist a support network among employees that help the employee with ID to better integrate to the workplace culture? If yes how does it help?

Managers:
1. What is _____________ role here?
2. What do you think your employee with an ID brings to workplace culture and wellbeing?
3. What accommodations does this employee require?
4. Do any of your employees without intellectual disabilities require accommodations?
5. How is _________ included in workplace culture?
6. Does your employee with ID have his/her break at the same time as everyone else?
7. Does your employee with ID eat lunch with everyone else?
8. What inclusive practices (hiring, supervision, orientation, training and evaluation) do you follow?
9. Is everyone invited to staff meetings? How are employees with ID supported to participate in meetings?
10. Are there any social customs that everyone participates in such as making the coffee or cleaning the kitchen?

Employee with an Intellectual Disability
1. What is your role?
2. How did you get hired?
3. Do you feel like you “belong” here? Why?
4. What do you think you bring to the culture here?
5. Do you socialize with your co-workers? At work/Outside of work?
6. How comfortable do you feel in approaching your colleagues when you are faced with a situation that needs help?
7. Do you like working with your co-workers.
APPENDIX II
Suggestion for Employers for Job Coaching

- We have a buddy system, where we pair up someone who has been here awhile with the new employee while they go through their training and orientation. It makes it a lot easier if people think they have a friend they can turn to. We try to team up people around the same age and with same interests.
- It is not [job coaches] job to funnel out what they think or don't think, or what the job seeker would like or not like, it is their job to get the [job seeker] in the door and let the [job seeker] handle the rest.
- The systems and paternalistic approach is the number one barrier
- Mentorship, something we would do for each other….role modeling, mentorship and leading by example
- Demonstrate respect for all co-worker because if they didn’t have something to contribute they would not be here.
- We didn’t scrimp on his training to ensure his job was well done and he wasn’t just a figure head.
- Ensure the person have the skill set to fill the role or modify the role.
- [we have] corporate values that embrace diversity, we are held accountable to our values and we create that culture….