

THE BENEFITS TO HIRING
INDIVIDUALS WITH
INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES:
EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES



Final Report
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Canada

Prepared by:

Taylor Wells, Lead Researcher, taylor.wells@alumni.ubc.ca

Dr. Rachelle Hole, Supervisor, rachelle.hole@ubc.ca

Dr. Shelly Ben-David, Committee member, shelly.ben-david@ubc.ca

Dr. John Graham, Committee member, john.graham@ubc.ca

**School of Social Work
University British Columbia**

Okanagan Campus

1147 Research Road

Kelowna, British Columbia

V1V 1V7, Canada

P: 250-807-8738

F: 250-807-9865

ask.socialwork@ubc.ca

Centre of Inclusion and Citizenship

c/o Dr. Rachelle Hole

FHSD/ARTS 1147 Research Road

Kelowna, British Columbia

V1V 1V7, Canada

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Summary

Employment is important for all people as it provides a sense of purpose and meaningful contribution to society. People with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) often face employer discrimination when searching for work. This report summarizes a study completed for a master's thesis in the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. In the study, employers who have hired and retained employees with ID were interviewed on their experiences. The goal of the study was to learn about the benefits associated with hiring people with ID, and to obtain advice from experienced employers to provide information to hesitant employers. Negative stereotypes about people with ID can be challenged with knowledge on how people with ID contribute to the workforce. The findings from the study can be used to educate hesitant employers on the benefits to hiring people with ID, with the hope of improving employment rates for people with ID.

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Why is this study important?

Background Information

Employment is an important milestone for all individuals, regardless of ability. Employment is a social determinant of health, contributing to improved physical and mental health, including self-esteem, confidence, and greater life satisfaction ¹⁻³. Employment can provide a structured routine and a social community/network, as well as provide purpose and a sense of meaningful contribution to society ⁴. Additionally, employment can provide an environment to learn new and relevant skills, and, one of the primary motivators, money/benefits for life's necessities and pleasures ⁴⁻⁶. Many individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) desire meaningful community participation and are motivated to work ^{4,7}. Despite this desire, employment rates for people with ID are considerably low ^{8,9}. Negative employer attitudes are one of the main barriers faced by individuals with ID in securing competitive integrated employment ¹⁰⁻¹⁶. It is a myth that many of those with ID do not want to work and/or are unable to work. No one who wants to work, should be excluded from the labour market, and with the right assessment, tools, support, and welcoming employers, this is achievable.

Key Definitions

Developmental Disability (DD) - Umbrella term that includes all disabilities that manifest before the age of 18 years, such as intellectual and/or physical disabilities ¹⁷

Intellectual Disability (ID) - A form of Development Disability; Impaired intellectual and adaptive functioning that manifests before the age of 18 years. For the purpose of this study and in recognizing the heterogeneity of the population labeled as ID, employees with ID are not defined by their Intelligence Quotient (IQ) score nor the severity of their disability ^{18,19}

Adaptive Functioning - How well a person independently manages common life demands, such as social skills, conceptual skills, and practical skills ²⁰

Employment First - Initiative for systemic change that prioritizes competitive integrated employment for disabled people, before any other non-employment options are considered ²¹

Competitive Integrated Employment - Employment in the open-labour market that provides at least minimum wage and similar benefits to all employees, regardless of ability ²¹

Diversability - Rebranding of the term 'disability'. Connotes the recognition of the diverse abilities of individuals who want to contribute and participate in society

Heterogeneous/heterogeneity - Diverse in character

How was the study implemented?

Methodology

Employers who have had one and a half- to 30 years' experience hiring employees with ID were interviewed on the benefits to hiring and retaining workers with ID. The sample included 13 employers and 2 additional workplace managers, totalling 15 participants. Interviews were semi-structured by using a written guide and lasted on average 46 minutes. With participant permission, interviews were recorded and/or hand-written notes were taken. The audio recordings and notes were typed on a computer and analyzed using a qualitative data analysis software.

Participant demographics

Table 1 depicts the number of years' experience employers had in hiring people with ID. Table 2 depicts employment longevity. Some employers had more than one employee with ID; Note in Table 2 that the number of employees is greater than the number of study participants (employers). Additionally, in some cases, the employers had many employees with ID (i.e., 15) and could not provide exact numbers regarding employment longevity; these employees are not included in Table 2.

Table 1 Employer Years' Experience	
# of Employers	Years' Experience
3	1 to 2
2	3 to 5
4	6 to 10
1	11 to 15
1	16 to 20
1	21 to 25
1	Over 30

Table 2 Employment Longevity of Employees with ID	
# of Employees	Employment Longevity (Years)
4	1
3	2
3	3 to 5
1	6 to 10
2	11 to 15
1	Over 15

What are the benefits to hiring people with Intellectual Disabilities?

According to the collective responses of the 15 participants, employing individuals with ID lead to a more positive workplace environment, better business and greater employer job satisfaction. Additionally, most employees with ID were accompanied by community support and expertise, which employers identified as a benefit to hiring people with ID as it contributed to the employees' success in the workplace. It is important to remember the employers' heterogeneity, just as it is important to remember the heterogeneity of the population that identify as intellectually disabled. These are their collective responses; the diversity of the employers in this study contribute to differing opinions and experiences that could not all be individually expressed.

1 Workplace Environment

Hiring employees with ID led to a more positive workplace environment, bolstered by their personalities, contributing to a sense of teamwork and employer perspective shift on workplace operations.

- **Employee Personality** - Employees with ID were described by their employers as, kind, passionate, social, dedicated, humorous, thankful, and hardworking. Many employers explained how their employees' personalities contributed to their success in the workplace in that they have an appreciative attitude and are eager to do a good job and please their supervisors and coworkers. Most employers also mentioned their employees' social and caring nature and how this contributed to a more positive workplace environment. They also mentioned how appreciative their employees are for the opportunity to demonstrate their worth and to be praised for their work. Some employers described their employees' constant positive attitudes and energy, in that they are always smiling and having fun. Many employers explained how these characteristics influence their other employees, creating a more positive atmosphere.

I feel like she loves doing [her work] so much and has such a good attitude doing it... For example, some of our employees, when you ask them to do stuff...[they] are negative and [say] it's tedious and boring but for Lisa, she is so excited to come and do that stuff - Employer 3

It would be nice to see if we had somebody like [the employee with ID] in every program, because there is a lot of affection attached to [him]: [it's] relationship [building] - Employer 1

- **Team-Building** - Employers discussed the sense teamwork their employees with ID brought to the workforce. Many employers discussed how their staff is willing to work together and help each other. This extended beyond non-disabled employees helping those employees with ID, but with all staff helping each other. This sense of teamwork provides employees with greater purpose and greater responsibility. It encourages employees with a desire to come to work. Many employers also discussed the increased respect staff members have for their colleagues (i.e., employees without disabilities understand how employees with ID contribute to the workforce). When colleagues recognize and appreciate each other's work and respect each other, they are more likely to want to work together. This all contributes to a more positive workplace environment.

[I wanted] not better employees, but better people...I wanted the girls here to kind of adopt her if you will, and they have - Employer 9

...It's a fantastic team-building exercise for people that run businesses, if they want to build teams. How many people work towards a common goal? If the common goal is 'we're going to work with...people [with ID] and we're going to see them succeed and go forward and see the changes that happen,' I mean I'd go to work for that...that would make my day at work a lot better - Employer 13
- **Perspective shift** - Hiring individuals with ID provides the opportunity to see employment and company operation through a different lens; it encourages employers to realize the importance of a more positive work environment, and how this contributes to better, more hard-working employees. Additional shifts in perspective included seeing the benefits to job customization (employment that involves carving out/tailoring a position within a company that may not have previously existed), and the importance of flexibility. Many employers noted that all staff should be treated differently as everyone has different strengths, interests and desires. Some employers posited that when all employees are given tasks that are suited to their strengths, workplace operations run more smoothly. Regarding flexibility, some employers stated that it is worth investing the time in hiring and retaining employees with ID for the hard-working and dedicated employees you receive.

I think that anybody in [the] community who is hiring inclusively needs to recognize that they have to not only change their day-to-day practices with that individual that has [a] diverse situation, they have to practice that with their regular mainstream employees, and as soon as they do that, I think you are going to see a swift change in the whole structure of how people perceive their employers: the happiness piece in the workplace - Employer 5

2 Business

Employees with ID contributed to better business by filling roles, demonstrating strong work ethics and bringing diversity to the workforce. As a preface, it is importance to note that many employees with ID *contribute* to better business, not necessarily that they alone are the reason for better business. Employees with ID do not necessarily create more business; that said, in most employment settings, it is unreasonable to expect any employee, regardless of ability, to solely create more business for a company/organization.

Nonetheless, it is reasonable to expect that all your employees contribute to better business in some way; employees with ID are no different.

- **Filled roles** - Employees with ID are filling roles that need to be filled; they are completing tasks that need to be completed by someone. Employers described a variety of roles and responsibilities. As examples, the employees with ID were cooks, cashiers, cleaners, early childhood educators, dishwashers, courtesy clerks, sales representatives and much more. They completed tasks such as stocking shelves, recycling, checking and ordering inventory, shredding, performing sweep logs, training other staff, shoveling, heavy lifting, and much more. Employees ranged from working one half-day a week to 40 hours a week. This was based on both employee and employer needs. Some of the employees with ID had the same job descriptions and qualifications as employees without disabilities. Some of the employees with ID had more customizable positions where they were filling a gap in service and/or completing certain tasks so other employees could focus solely on completing their tasks.

[Receiving subsidies for disabled workers] doesn't change if I'm going to hire them or not: if I get it, it's great. If I don't, it's fine...because I still need to have those roles filled and...to be totally honest, I have less challenges sometimes with people that have intellectual disabilities than the...[other] people - Employer 4

We have minimum requirements that anybody needs to meet to work here, and these individuals [with ID] meet this requirement - Employer 6

- **Employee work ethic** - Employers underscored the work ethic of their employees with ID. Many of the employees with ID requested a challenge and were excited to take on new tasks. Employers spoke about their employees with ID in terms of their dedication to work, and their job ownership. Finding dedicated employees is difficult for many employers, and it makes good business-sense to seek out employees who are ready, willing and able. With dedication, also comes longevity. Some employers voiced difficulty in retaining employees for more than two years, especially in some of the roles that the employees with ID fill. Hiring people with ID can be a good business decision, especially in terms of employment longevity.

...that is one of our biggest challenges...to have the employees that are dedicated...lots of them are just a bit flaky and you know, it could be a server, a kitchen person, it could be anybody, just kind of "Oh, I'm really sick today" or ... "Oh, I have to go out of town," but with [my employee with ID]... it's not...the responsibility that he has, he recognizes that as a responsibility - Employer 7

His attendance is impeccable. He's never sick. He never complains and...he's like the perfect employee - Employer 12

- **Colleague work ethic** - Another benefit to hiring employees with ID is an increase in staff's work ethic. Some employers discussed a change in staff members' work ethic with having a co-worker with ID. These changes were two-fold: 1) colleagues demonstrated emerging leadership and supervisory skills, and 2) colleagues' work ethics were challenged due to the strong work ethic of the employees with ID. Improved colleague work ethic could be another benefit to hiring someone with ID. Remember again the concept of heterogeneity; each person with ID is different and each staff

member and staff dynamic is different. In most cases, it is unreasonable to expect one staff member to promote greater work ethic in all other staff members.

I'm thinking of Bob. Every single day that he's there, he's the only employee I've had to say slow down to... This guy just goes nuts, but what does he do? He shows everyone else that it can be done. So now you're praising him and saying "c'mon [to the rest of the staff]" - Employer 10

- **Diversity** - Some employers discussed how a diverse work environment can make good business-sense. Some employers noticed that customers enjoy seeing the diversity in their workplace. This can draw customers to the company/organization and increase business. An employer explained how customers are drawn to their particular company because they hire inclusively and/or because the customer identifies with the diverse group that works there.

We are [who we are] because of that fact that [our employees] are diverse, and that community comes in and they support us because they know that we are employing diverse individuals and giving them an opportunity to be skilled in a certain field
- Employer 5

3 Employer Job Satisfaction

Employers experienced greater job satisfaction in knowing that they were making a difference by hiring inclusively and connecting to the community. Employers themselves also reap the benefits of a more positive workplace environment that is promoted by the personality and contributions of those with ID and the team-building that it ensues. When employers shift their perspectives, it can also promote greater job satisfaction and happiness not only at work but also outside of work.

Spend the time to get to know the individual [with ID]. Know your people. Promote their welfare first, like you would do with anybody else. Because in the end of the day, you will actually probably benefit more yourself, you'll learn more - Employer 11

[I get] to celebrate [diversity] every day...I'm not supposed to feel this much joy at work! - Employer 2

- **Community Connection** - Employers voiced job satisfaction related to the fact that their company/organization is connected to the community. Some employers stated how they strive to be community-oriented and serve the community, and how there is great satisfaction in that. Some employers voiced satisfaction in knowing they are contributing to a society where the community appreciates seeing diversity in the stores where they shop, in the restaurants where they eat, and in the places they go for recreational activities. Similarly, some employers voiced happiness in knowing that people with disabilities are seeing their social group represented in the workforce and in the community. Many employers interviewed were also connected to community employment support services and accessed their expertise to ensure the most successful employment for

It gives the rest of the staff, and the [employees with ID] ...a sense of community. I mean, you see someone who isn't like them, and that's what I like. I love seeing [that], you know, and I love them...I look at us as being community-building...We're here to make sure [the recreational activity] exists in the community...It's [about] seeing other parts of the community involved and active...and that's one of the reasons I do it...that's what we are. We do all kinds of things like that, to be community-oriented - Employer 8

their employees with ID. When employers and social service providers come together, each bringing their expertise, they work towards building a sense of community.

4 Community Support and Expertise

Employers commented on the benefits of community support professionals who assist with hiring, training and retaining employees with ID. It was argued that anyone can benefit from one-on-one support, regardless of ability. Therefore, when employees with ID are accompanied by a one-on-one support worker with expertise, this can be interpreted as a benefit to hiring people with ID. From the experiences of the employers interviewed, free support in the community can ensure successful employment for those with ID, so employers can more readily see and reap the benefits of having an employee with ID.

- **Hiring Support** - When asking the employers about the hiring process, it was discerned that community support professional assisted in finding the best person for the job, by performing assessments and discerning individuals' likes and strengths. The community support professionals had discussions with the employers about company/organization needs and/or gaps in service. Through this dialogue and through the community support workers' expertise in assessment, the community support professionals provided employers with job candidates who could perform the required tasks. Community support professionals also provided their expertise in customization, helping employers to think outside the box when delegating work tasks.

[We determine the skillsets of our employees with ID] with [them] ... and [with] the external support that we're getting ... We took 5 or 6 different jobs and gave them all to [the external support to decide], and we might get one employee doing pieces from this job, pieces from this job, pieces from this job, because [the support worker] recognized that this is a skillset this person can have. They have a skillset that they love talking to people and they can show some efficiency in that. Great! Let's get 'em in there - Employer 10
- **Training Support** - Most employers described the community support professionals as typically realistic in the additional supports that some people with ID require in starting a new position. For most employers, community support professionals provided complementary individualized hands-on support in teaching the new employee with ID the most effective methods to perform their new job (typically referred to as 'job coaches'). This alleviated any training concerns with having a new employee with ID and gave the employers and managers time to focus on their other roles within the company/organization. This training support not only alleviated time concerns, but also concerns in how to train people with ID. The job coaches have expertise in how to effectively train someone with particular communication and learning styles, setting the employees with ID up for success. In most circumstances, the community support professionals also provided continual assessment. For example, employers communicated with the job coach before increasing employee responsibility at work. Assessment also occurred when job coaches started to wean off their support; they assessed when their clients were able to work with less support, or with no support, providing retaining strategies to the employer, stating they were available to assist whenever needed.

[There is] no incurred labour [to] bring someone in to support - Employer 11

[Without the support], I don't think that the person [with ID] ...would have got as much care. It was a good education experience for us, for the supervisors, to have a professional that [is] trained [to work with] people with disabilities, because we're not, right? We have operations backgrounds. We don't even have HR backgrounds. They just did a really good job on, again, educating us. They one hundred percent took care of them, brought them to and from break, made sure that they were trained, that they were being taken care of
- Employer 12

- **Retaining Support** - Most employers found advantage to having community support when addressing employer retention for their employees with ID. For some employers the community support professional would perform reviews. For others, they made themselves available for check-ins if necessary. Some employers found that they did not need any assistance with retaining their employee with ID as the employee with ID was adequately trained and knew how to do their job. Additionally, some employers felt capable to retain their employees themselves, just like any other employee.

[The employee with ID] has been here for a really long time, so [the support] is not really needed. We have a good relationship with [the employee with ID]. She knows she is comfortable here and loves coming here, so it's pretty easy to train her with things... She is very independent and good at coming in and doing her thing - Employer 3

What should be done with these findings?

The 'what should be done with these findings?' is the whole purpose of a study such as this one. The present study contributes to the Employment First initiative in its attempts for systemic change, including competitive integrated employment for disabled people. Emphasis is placed on autonomy, career development, and community integration. One of the primary goals of the present study was to educate employers on the benefits to hiring people with ID.

Advice from the study's employers to hesitant employers

Above and beyond the employers' contribution to the literature on the benefits to hiring people with disabilities, study participants provided advice to hesitant employers.

- **Seek education** - Collectively, the employers interviewed stated that more hesitant employers should seek education on disability and inclusivity as well as seek contact with persons with disabilities. Employers discussed how the fear could be diminished by talking to employers like themselves, who have had success in retaining employees with ID.

It's just that one connection to that special person and you're hooked
- Employer 2

"[We need] to connect them with somebody like myself that has had a good experience...to actually have an example of an employer that can say...these are the benefits - Employer 12

- **Shift your perspective** - Shift how you view workplace operations and accommodate all employees, as every staff member, regardless of ability, has challenges and strengths. Some employers defined disability as 'diversability' and encourage others to shift their perspective in how they view people with ID.

I hate the word disability. It implies that someone is not able...and that's why we reference...diversability, because people are diverse and...they may have something...going on but that's okay, because if we are all diverse in how we think, then the world becomes a better place. So I'm not a fan of the word disability because I do believe that the word 'dis' is a dis. It is a dis to the individual and it's a disservice to that person who has a diagnosis... - Employer 5

It's not disability, it's diversabilities and what it is, is people that are challenged by certain parts of their intellect. That doesn't mean they are stupid, it just means that they have a challenge in learning things, they have a challenge in how they approach things, they have a challenge in their memory. Whatever they have a challenge with, it doesn't mean that they have a disability. It just means that they learn or they speak or they communicate in different ways; so I always try to look at it that way...if you can find what they do, what they want to do, what their strength is, then that's what they need to do, is find tasks that embrace their strengths - Employer 8

- **Access support** - Employers should access support, whether for hands-on support in hiring (assessment), training and retaining, and/or financial support. Community support professionals can also share their expertise in describing the benefits to hiring people with ID, can connect hesitant employers to experienced employers.

[This] makes good business sense and you get good training [from the support] - Employer 11

During the hiring, we need to partner up with organizations that are supporting people with disabilities because they have the expertise and the training to assess and evaluate different kinds of disabilities. Whereas I know nothing, and most employers won't know anything. So, I would say to find a nonprofit that runs this type of employment service and investigate them and see if you could use them. And then during the training process again make your expectations really clear to the support worker as to what you expect. Raise your concerns in advance and then collaborate with the agency to try and find a fit - Employer 13

- **Promote strong management** - Employers mentioned the importance of having a strong management team at work and provided definitions of effective leadership. This is advice for any workplace, regardless of the employees' abilities. Nonetheless, the employers interviewed stated that effective leadership is evidenced by continual assessment, clear communication,

[This is] what it should be with every employee and I think because of that, that's where we're seeing some success with some long-term people - Employer 10

transparency, approachability, patience, and flexibility. The employers interviewed stated that employers should provide concrete expectations and clear instructions. They should ask relevant questions and provide constant encouragement and positive reinforcement. This too should be for all employees, regardless of ability.

My management team is really strong...so generally I would say within six months you can kind of see [that they are ready for more roles], three to six months, and that's normal for anybody right. Can they take on more, depending on their capacity, do they want to take on more...? - Employer 4

- Some employers provided advice on how to train employees with ID through modeling and leading by example. One small-sized employer stated that she draws diagrams for her employee with ID so he has a visual reminder of the tasks at hand (Employer 1). Another employer explained that he follows up with his employee with ID to ensure that he understand what was explained, asking him to "mirror it back (Employer 12)." One medium-sized employer stated that it can be as simple as "showing different ways to do the same thing (Employer 2)" Another employer stated, "I'll do things with her the first time and then the next time she is good on her own (Employer 3)." This patience and flexibility is a great mindset for management teams for all employees as everyone has their strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles.

- **Try it!** - Some employers explicitly stated that hesitant employers should hire people with ID, because after you try it, you'll begin to learn their value.

Try it! Give it a chance...Just see what it does, how it helps, what they can do - Employer 4

It's easy to [hire people with ID], and it's easy not to [hire people with ID]. So, it's easy to hire these people [with ID] – bring them on, get their energy, get them showing what they can do, or it's easy not to. Choose the easy to do - Employer 10

Conclusions

The findings in the present study speak to the benefits to hiring people with ID, while remembering the heterogeneity of all peoples.

Four major findings emerged that describe the benefits to hiring people with ID:

- 1) Workplace Environment
- 2) Business

- 3) Employer Job Satisfaction
- 4) Community Support and Expertise

Employers in the study provided advice to hesitant employers, stating they should:

- Seek education
- Shift their perspective
- Access support
- Promote strong management
- Try it!

Although employers are the primary intended audience for the study, they are not the only intended audience. The hope is that the findings from this study will empower individuals with ID and potentially assist them when job searching. Additionally, the findings can assist community support organizations who advocate for people with ID and who speak to employers about the benefits to hiring people with ID. Furthermore, job coaches may be able to use this information to inform their job coaching and the way they approach and support employers. Finally, studies such as the present one can be used to inform policy such as financial assistance and program curriculum, like transition programs and adult job readiness programs. All in all, this research is intended for everyone. It is important for our society to recognize and respect the abilities of disabled people, and to assist in working toward inclusion for everyone.

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*note names in quotes are pseudonyms