

## **Employment Now! CCRW National Conference**

### **Action Plan for a National Employment Delivery Framework for persons with disabilities**

#### **Introduction:**

#### **Why a National Employment Delivery Strategy Framework?**

A continuing challenge for society is to integrate persons with disabilities into the workforce. These difficulties and challenges are not new and have been officially articulated since at least 1985 when in the Parliamentary Committee on Equality Rights report to the House of Commons it was identified that:

“Disabled people suffer from extraordinarily high unemployment rates. When they are employed, they tend to be concentrated in low-paying, marginal sectors of the labour market. They also have expenses that non-disabled workers do not face, such as medication, special aids and devices, and special transportation services (page 105).”

In January 1985, the Federal Government introduced Bill C62 which provided for the establishment of Employment Equity Programs in all corporations under federal jurisdiction. This included crown corporations with 100 or more employees. At the time over 40 percent of this labour force was in Ontario and 20 percent was in Quebec.

While the establishment of Employment Equity Programs was to promote and increase the employment of persons with disabilities, statistical data indicates that the labour force representation of persons with disabilities has been relatively modest or flat. By example, employment within this group increased from 1.59 percent in 1987 to 2.30 percent in 1990, and 2.56 percent in 1993 and 2.63 percent in 1994. Further analysis demonstrates however, that these increases have been offset by the increased terminations of persons with disabilities in the workforce and changes in the rate of self-identification.

Even with the historical record number of hires articulated in the 1995 Employment Equity Act report (16,100) only marginal representation of persons with disabilities continues in the over two million employees governed by the Act.

Most organized efforts seek to promote fairness. At the same time increased awareness fostered by legislation encourages the necessity to remove barriers. While the theoretical removal of barriers at the level of policy and legislation may help to open doors to increase employment of persons with disabilities, such efforts are seldom enough to place persons with disabilities in meaningful and equitable positions.

Many barriers continue to exist and are difficult to overcome. Often job seekers with disabilities do not have the specific transferable skills and experience needed to compete for jobs in today's labour market. Lack of access to specific skills programs has been noted as a contributing factor.

Perceptions, attitudes and cultural biases within organizations constrain the recruitment, hiring and employment of persons with disabilities. Yet, the existence of these perceptions, attitudes and biases is recognized, as is the need for external effective marketing, communications and public relations initiatives to foster change.

The CCRW recognizes that the need for continuing the development of initiatives creating employment opportunities for persons with disabilities while addressing the employer's needs is imperative.

It has been identified that job seekers must take the necessary steps to achieving competence in the labour force by gaining employability skills. Employability skills are not developed solely through being employed. A person can develop these skills by being active in his/her community and/or by working with others in a classroom or other group environment.

In October 2004, the Ontario provincial government introduced a new Bill, Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), 2004. Ontario has been the lead province enacting a strong and effective AODA requiring all public and private organizations to show an improvement in accessibility by 25% every five years until 2025 when it is anticipated that the province will be barrier free.

In 2005, the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW) conducted a study entitled Diversity Planning for Inclusive Employment (DPIE). The primary purpose of this study was to gather information from identified, targeted employers across Canada about their awareness of the disability agenda and their obligations under the governing Employment Equity Act and Human Rights Code as they relate to employing persons with disabilities. A corollary to this purpose was to assist the disability community (in general) with identifying concrete measures/methods that employers require to increase their capacity for enabling Canadians with disabilities to participate fully in the workplace.

Seven key findings emerged from this research. The first and foremost of the findings was the recognition that attitudes and cultural biases within organizations continue to be a barrier against the hiring of persons with disabilities.

Halifax Global Inc., the consulting company completing the research with the CCRW, recommended that the CCRW undertake a strategic initiative to seek support from appropriate funding agencies to develop a detailed, strategic business plan and operating model to define the needs of key stakeholders including persons with disabilities, employers and support agencies across Canada (as they relate to enhancing the employment opportunities of persons with disabilities) together with a companion roadmap for 'roll out' of the strategy and an evaluation framework to measure performance and progress following implementation. This strategy should be or include a National Employment Delivery Strategy (and Accommodation Fund).

## Results from the Employment Now! National Conference

In October 2008 during its Employment Now! National Conference, the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW) conducted focused discussions with employers, persons with disabilities and community agencies in attendance regarding what was to be viewed as strategic imperatives to be included in an employment delivery strategic framework for persons with disabilities.

Each component of this section includes a discussion of what is needed, followed by some suggested goals and options for action.

These goals and options for action are intended to facilitate discussion, stimulate new ideas and build consensus during future additional national consultation processes.

We invite your ideas and comments.

Participants during the Conference responded to the following four strategic imperatives:

a) From the perspectives of employers, job seekers with disabilities and community agencies, are these the strategic imperatives to be included in an employment delivery strategy framework for persons with disabilities? What's missing?

- A.** Employer education and disability awareness
- B.** National policies respecting the employment life cycle
- C.** Research – Nation-wide, local, provincial
- D.** National one-stop information system

b) How do we move forward?

Responses obtained from the October 2008 conference have been captured in the following document and are for review and additional discussion in formulating the National Employment Delivery Strategy Framework for the hiring and retention of persons with disabilities.

## A. EMPLOYER EDUCATION AND DISABILITY AWARENESS

*Goal: Reduce the attitudinal barriers associated with hiring persons with disabilities in Canada.*

Action Steps:

Develop an effective national public awareness strategy that would include initiatives to:

- Work with disability related community agencies and persons with disabilities to develop national education materials and dissemination strategies about the nature of disabilities.
- Encourage and support provincial ministries to integrate the disability agenda and disability issues into school curricula.
- Involve persons with disabilities, who use programs and services, in the development and implementation of national strategies.
- Work with members of the media to provide informed and accurate public information and raise awareness regarding disabilities.
- Create a national clearinghouse for information specific to disabilities and disability organizations and agencies prepared to support an employer's needs in hiring and retaining persons with disabilities in their workforce.

*Goal: Increase employer knowledge and awareness of effective and best practices in recruiting, hiring and retaining persons with disabilities.*

Action Steps:

- Working in collaboration with disability related community agencies and persons with disabilities:
  - Develop a national campaign to raise the awareness regarding the ability of persons with disabilities as members of the workforce.
  - Develop and articulate a business case focusing on the disability agenda and provide this information to businesses across Canada.
  - Recognition of regional differences imperative and therefore recognition of how businesses will subscribe to 'diversity' in their workplace needs to be supported.
- Co-ordinate a national public education and awareness campaign that provides clear and accurate information regarding policies, programs and supports for employers who seek to hire job seekers with disabilities.

- Develop clear and consistent messages that can be made readily available to employers. This could be in the form of fact sheets available on a designated web-site articulating information on accommodation, research, policies, legislation, diversity planning, community organizations etc.
- Develop a national campaign designed to target the general public on understanding disability (i.e.: similar to Americans with Disabilities Act in USA)
- Develop a national awareness campaign that talks to the success of employers who have hired persons with disabilities encouraging such employers to champion the disability agenda.

## **B. NATIONAL POLICIES RESPECTING THE EMPLOYMENT LIFE CYCLE**

An essential component of the discussions leading toward a National Employment Delivery Strategy Framework, requires cross-jurisdictional involvement, evolving out of consensus among all stakeholders involved in the process.

It was suggested and supported during the Conference that the CCRW be the lead organization to investigate, develop and inform Conference participants regarding the formation of the “Disability Sector Council”. This Disability Sector Council would need to demonstrate relevance, responsiveness, and connectivity and be community-based.

*Goal: Ensure the development and implementation of every federal policy and legislative initiative addresses the impacts that will occur in every stage of the employment life cycle.*

Action Steps:

- Empower a federal, provincial and territorial working group to work in collaboration with stakeholders to develop and adopt criteria that can be used to evaluate the impact of existing policy and legislation on persons with disabilities in the various stages of the employment life cycle.
- Develop a process to clearly articulate how policies will be enforced, whom policies are impacting and what policies mean to each stakeholder group.
- Investigate with the Government of Canada the process to complete the formation of the “Disability Sector Council”. Using these findings communicate with national disability agencies regarding the potential of moving toward a sector council initiative.

*Goal: Establish national key deliverables and outcomes from existing policy and legislation designed to impact the employment life cycle.*

Action Steps:

- Develop guidelines for stakeholder involvement (i.e. consumers, families, providers, employers, community agencies) to ensure input into policies and programs that have a link to the stages of the employment life cycle is obtained.

- Develop benchmarks for all employment related programs and services including education and sensitivity training.
- Develop guidelines and benchmarks for the promotion of disability issues and related education outreach activities nation-wide.

*Goal: Develop partnerships designed to remove societal barriers regarding the hiring and retention of persons with disabilities.*

The goal of the National Employment Delivery Strategy Framework is to improve the employment outcomes of Canadians with disabilities by enhancing their employability, increasing employment opportunities that are available and build on employer capacity to ensure there is a clear understanding of the role persons with disabilities may provide in the current workforce.

Action Steps:

- Using a series of regional forums, undertake a national collaboration bringing together stakeholder representatives (ie. Persons with disabilities, employers, disability related organizations, governments) to discuss the impact of training programs on workforce strategies.
- Conduct interviews with employees who have identified as being persons with disabilities regarding ‘what worked’ for them in their journey to successful employment.

*Goal: Develop a national task force on cross disability with representation from each province and territory comprising of government and non-government representation. (This task force to include persons with disabilities, employers and other stakeholders enabling input and feedback from each province in Canada).*

Action Steps:

- Establish a stakeholder task force from the members of the disability community (includes persons with disabilities, employers, etc.) and various levels of government to strengthen participation in national policy development.
- National task force to build on work completed by disability related organizations and businesses completed to date and focus its efforts on including the small and medium business sector.

## C. RESEARCH –NATION-WIDE, LOCAL AND PROVINCIAL

Disability related organizations continue to operate as individual units and entities. There does not appear to be a coordinated approach to work that has been completed or is in the process of being completed as it relates to the disability agenda. As such, researchers and their related funding agencies do not have a focused agenda on research issues relating to disability.

Conference participants identified much has been completed in research however little has been communicated nationally regarding outcomes. Others questioned “What happens after the research is done? Who obtains the results? Where are the findings and how do these findings impact the disability agenda?”

It was suggested that connecting research to outcomes and gaps is required in order to decrease potential redundancy. Research was not ranked highly as a need in the development of the National Employment Delivery Strategy Framework but rather the gathering and dissemination of existing research.

*Goal: Establish, implement and support a national disability research agenda.*

Action Steps:

- With guidance from a national task force, create a set of priorities and research ‘directions’ regarding cross disability.
- Across sectors, encourage and support networks of research.
- Develop and distribute a national based information tool (ie. newsletter, web site, etc.) providing current and detailed information regarding disability related research completed during the current year. (Annual updates with a repository of other research would be important.)
- Distribute research findings to all levels of government and those involved in the development of public policy.

## D. NATIONAL ONE-STOP INFORMATION SYSTEM

Conference participants using a ‘wide lens view’ addressed this strategic imperative.

One: There is no consistent approach to providing assistance or information to employers about issues relating to the employment of persons with disabilities.

Two: There does not appear to be a consistent or transparent approach to measuring and evaluating the impact of policies, programs and services on the employment of persons with disabilities in Canada.

The discussion completed on October 7, 2008 clearly noted that community agencies/organizations deliver programs and services and provide information based on specific requests, their capacity and capabilities rather than in support of any delineated national strategy or plan designed to enhance the employment of persons with disabilities.

This discussion was consistent with findings articulated in the CCRW DPIE 2005 study. Participants questioned “Who would create this portal? Who regulates the content? Would it be similar to the Government of Canada’s Job Bank portal? Will all disability groups get equal representation? Public versus private employers, are there distinctions and would each need a targeted approach to information?”

*Goal: Create a national one-stop portal (web site).*

Action Steps:

- National disability related organizations or the newly formed National task force on disability to collect information from across the provinces and territories for inclusion in the one-stop portal.
- Portal to be divided into areas of interest for all stakeholders, services and programs available in each region and focusing specifically on small and medium employers.
- Compliance with web accessibility and standards a requirement.

## CONCLUSION

This is a living document developed from the discussion outcome of October 6 & 7, 2008 Employment Now! Conference.

Many of the details contained are not new to the disability agenda nor has the employment of persons with disabilities reached any record proportions.

It is the hope that this document will encourage discussion from stakeholders and will provide a 'spring board' toward building consensus on the National Employment Delivery Strategy Framework for Persons with Disabilities.

Based on a full year of discussion and input from a variety of stakeholders, the final draft framework will be presented during the CCRW 2009 Conference.