2024 LMI Report

This is a plain language version of the original **New Inclusive Economy Report.**

Link: Read the original version of this document.

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Introduction

The **New Inclusive Economy** is a research project in **British Columbia (B.C.)** led by **inclusion powell river society** and funded by the **Government of Canada and British Columbia.** A **Governance Committee** made up of business leaders, self-advocates, researchers, community living sector and government representatives helped guide the project.

Three research teams studied how employers can make workplaces more inclusive for people with disabilities. The research included **surveys, interviews, focus groups, and case studies** to understand how businesses —both large and small—hire inclusively. This also included **entrepreneurs with disabilities ("solo-preneurs")** who create their own work opportunities.

The study found that **workplaces are shaped by many factors**, including business policies, government support, and social attitudes. A **diverse economies approach** was used to look at non-traditional ways businesses support workers, such as helping employees get **childcare and eldercare,** and **flexible hours** with **alternative forms of pay.** These are diverse parts of the economy that we don't often consider when talking about employment.

Key findings show that businesses are shifting toward **inclusive work environments** by:

1. creating a workplace culture that welcomes diversity,
2. adapting jobs to individual needs,
3. using clear communication,
4. offering flexible work options,
5. balancing inclusion with business success,
6. valuing employees' lived experiences
7. having fair hiring practices,
8. partnering with community organizations, and
9. addressing barriers like transportation and housing.

This research suggests that some businesses are moving away from a profit-first approach and focusing more on inclusion and employee well-being. While some employers do not view inclusion as an added cost to doing business and don't feel it impacts profits in a negative way.

Instead of focusing only on "best practices," this study explored **"promising practices,"** recognizing that different workplaces in different places need different solutions. The research also compared **B.C.'s policies to those of other regions** across Canada.

The study findings were shared in 8 cities and towns across B.C. in 2023 and online over zoom. Communities we visited included Surrey, Victoria, Prince George, Smithers, Terrace, Cranbrook, Fort St. John, and qathet (Powell River).

The **Promising Directions** section outlines **steps for government, employers, and support organizations** to improve inclusion. An Employer Practice Guide that provides **actionable tips** for employers, considering their size, structure, and industry can be found below.

Key Facts:

- **29% of people in B.C.** over age 15 have a disability (Statistics Canada, 2022).
- People with disabilities have an **unemployment rate 1.4 times higher** than those without disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2022).
- Many face barriers such as **transportation, inaccessible workplaces, and lack of affordable housing.**
- **StrongerBC Economic Plan** states: "If an economy is not working for people, then it's simply not working."
- This research shows that a **shift toward inclusion is needed.**

Research Approach and Methods

Research Question

What workplace conditions and practices lead to meaningful employment for people with disabilities? What are the alternative economic approaches to providing meaningful employment?

The research used **multiple methods**, including:

- **Literature Review** (what other studies say [https://newinclusiveeconomy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/literaturereviewplainlanguage.pdf].

- **Environmental scan** (studies of workplace trends)

- **Case studies** of real businesses

- **Interviews & focus groups** with employers

- **Business-to-business networking** events

The research was conducted in **four phases**:

- **Where are we now?** – Reviewing past research and setting up the Governance Committee.

- **What is missing?** – Surveying 87 employers across B.C. online.

- **Where do we want to go?** – Conducting case studies and employer interviews and focus groups.

- **What did we learn?** – Sharing findings through events and discussions.

The study found that **employers need more opportunities to learn from each other** and that **barriers beyond the workplace** also need to be addressed like transportation and affordable housing.

Promising Directions

#1. How Different Kinds of Workplaces Impact Inclusion

Some workplaces are more inclusive than others and that may be because of union rules, funding limits, or workplace culture and leadership. Sometimes the sector also impacts inclusion. However, New Inclusive Economy research shows that an employer's values may matter more than their structure.

In the survey of inclusive employers in B.C. many employers (22% of those surveyed) said they were Indigenous lead. There may be a connection between Indigenous leadership and inclusion.

Key Actions:

- To **find out if structure or values matter more** study many different workplaces in different sectors and ask how their values influence inclusion.
- Help **businesses in each sector share their experiences** with each other.
- Explore the link between **Indigenous leadership and inclusion**.

#2. Addressing Barriers Beyond Work

Many businesses support workers in ways beyond pay, such as childcare, eldercare, alternative pay and flexible hours. These supports can become barriers for employees if they are not supported. Wellbeing outside of work is not always considered as a necessary part of employment or talked about as an important part of the economy.

The term "social and solidarity economy" is used to describe an economy that includes non-market transactions like volunteering and community engagement and considers wellbeing outside of work.

Key Actions:

- Improve **HR practices that promote work-life balance** and include government in how it can help remove barriers beyond work like affordable housing, childcare and eldercare.
- Study what **"meaningful work"** means for employees with and without disabilities in different places around B.C.
- Develop better ways to **measure how work can promote wellbeing** outside of work.
- Work towards a **B.C. based definition of the social and solidarity economy.**

#3. Supporting Entrepreneurs with Disabilities

Many **entrepreneurs with disabilities** choose self-employment because they face **barriers in traditional jobs.** However, they also struggle with **healthcare, financial stability, and business support.**

Many of the entrepreneurs with disabilities or "solo-preneurs" who participated in the New Inclusive Economy research project were selling products and services directly to the disability community and promoting accessibility through their business.

Key Actions:

- Create **small business grants** for entrepreneurs with disabilities.
- Review disability income rules to **better support self-employed individuals** with income that changes year-over-year.
- **Pilot projects** that test, demonstrate and share knowledge about how to best support entrepreneurs with disabilities.
- Conduct market research to learn and promote how entrepreneurs with disabilities are **creating more accessible products and services.**

#4. Helping Employers Become More Inclusive

Traditionally, employment programs have focused on **helping job seekers**, but **employers also need support** to become more inclusive.

Many of the employers interviewed worked with employment agencies, while some did not and this may be because of an inclusive culture.

Some employers were led by people who do not have disabilities but are from other equity seeking groups like people of colour and Indigenous leaders and that was the motivation to create a more inclusive workplace.

Lastly, employers were divided on wage subsidies where the government pays for a person's wage while they learn the job. Some liked them, others did not feel they covered the time it takes to train someone.

Key Actions:

- Support **business networks** that share inclusive practices.

- Encourage cities to **adopt disability inclusion charters in addition to Accessibility Committees** now required by all cities as part of the Accessible Canada Act.

- Continue to **encourage employment service providers** to shift efforts to **support employers.**

- **Research** how employer **policies and practices work for different populations of people with disabilities** to further define "meaningful work".

- **Training allowances** to support employers in place of wage subsidies.

#5. Government's Role in Inclusion

Policies should be designed with **input from people with disabilities** to better support inclusive employment.

Key Actions:

- **Involve people with disabilities** in policy-making at a government level.

- **Fund businesses** to improve accessibility.

- Experiment with **temporary disability benefit exemptions** to encourage full-time work.

This research provides a **pathway toward a more inclusive economy in B.C.**, where people with disabilities have equal access to **meaningful jobs**.

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Thank You

We want to thank everyone who helped with the **New Inclusive Economy project**. This project is run by i**nclusion powell river society** on the traditional land of the Tla'amin Nation.

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Summary of Employer Practices

Purpose: What are some specific actions from this research study that employers can take to be more inclusive in their workplaces?

Context: There are more small businesses in B.C. and self- employment is more common than any other province in Canada. Of the 532,400 businesses in B.C. in 2021, 61% were self-employed without any help, 22% were businesses with 1 to 4 employees, and 15% were businesses with 5 to 49 employees. Screening (environmental scan) of employers for the interviews and focus groups allowed employers to self-identify according to the following categories:

- Self-employed
- 5 to 9 employees
- 10 to 19 employees
- 20 to 49 employees
- 50 to 99 employees
- 100 and over employees

Most actions and strategies below can be applied to most employers. It is noted when there is a difference for self-employed, smaller employers (under 10 employees) and larger employers (50 employees and over).

Research Themes:

1. Inclusive and Accessible Communication

2. Accessible Recruitment and Hiring practices

3. Workplace Accommodations/Accessibility

4. Scheduling and Working Conditions

5. Individualizing Roles

6. Employee Wellbeing and Benefits

7. Service Organizations Partnerships

8. Other Employer Partnerships

9. Addressing Barriers in the Local Community / Physical Environment

1. Inclusive and Accessible Communication	
Why Is this Important for inclusion?	- All workplaces rely on relationships built on good communication. - Different styles of communicating are often overlooked and can be a barrier in workplace hiring. - It's not about "just being nice". Open, accepting communication with employees that adapts to each person is important for employee success. - Inclusion and acceptance is important to have a happy, healthy, and safe work environment for everyone. - Inclusion is important to make sure that people with disabilities are not left out of the workforce.

1. Inclusive and Accessible Communication

Employer Actions	• Including employees with disabilities in choosing how the employee wants to communicate. • Adopting plain language in public-facing text. • Providing choices and options for daily communication (e.g., text, in-person, phone). • Make websites accessible. Work with others to develop individualized ways to communicate.
Are there differences in how this might work for different kinds of employers?	• People with disabilities are usually aware of the type of communication to suit their needs. • Smaller employers often use informal and ongoing communication. • Sometimes larger companies use accessibility committees or employee groups to handle making things accessible. All employers agree with that service organization help is important.
Research Participant Quote	"So, this guy, he loves reading comic books. So, [the job coaches] created a comic book starring him and being in the workplace and the strategies that he can then use… they did [a] comic strip when he was learning how to take a HandyDART because he had never taken it before from his house to work, and then from work to his day program…" (Manufacturing BC Focus Group)

2. Accessible Recruitment and Hiring Practices

Why Is this Important for inclusion?	• The normal hiring process can be a big barrier for people with disabilities. • Applicants can be screened out if their skills and experience are different and interviews can be a barrier. • People with disabilities prefer to work for inclusive companies and will look for this in job ads.
Employer Actions	• Make sure job ads are not too long or hard to read for someone with language barriers. Seek advice from people who have experience helping people with disabilities. • Make sure to mention your inclusivity in the job ad. • Automatically screen-in those that identify with having a disability. • Recruit directly from diverse groups and/or work with others to recruit people with disabilities. • Reconsider job requirements – remove unnecessary training or education criteria and focus on requirements for the job. • Be strength-based; look for useful skills and attitude over ability. • Offer different ways to apply. Make it easier for people with a disability to come in and inquire about the job. • Give interview questions before the interview, and consider making it an on the job interview because some are hands-on learners.

2. Accessible Recruitment and Hiring Practices

Are there differences in how this might work for different kinds of employers?	• Many self-employed people with disabilities can't hire but would hire others people with disabilities if they could in the future. • All employers can come up with simple ways to remove barriers in the hiring process.
Research Participant Quote	"My hiring philosophy now is attitude over aptitude and for the vast majority of our staff that are coming in, whether they identify as living with a disability or not, they're coming in with a really great attitude so I can teach them what they need to know." (Manufacturing BC Focus Group) "We've done some kind of working interviews which are awesome… We had one gentleman come in and he would have been fine, but he had severe arthritis in his hands, and that wasn't something that he could overcome based on the dexterity needed... for the [specific] job itself. So, it just wasn't the right fit. But on paper, he looked like he'd be a great candidate, but actually meeting the person, we came to that agreement that, you know, you're not going to be comfortable here. There's going to be something better for you out there. So, it gave us a lot more insight into how that would translate to what we needed as well as the individual." (Interviewee 6)

3. Workplace Accommodations/Accessibility

Why Is this Important for inclusion?	• There is a common myth that hiring employees with disabilities is hard and expensive. • Some people don't want to say they are disabled or ask to be treated differently. • Provide accessibility to everyone from the start to support inclusion.
Employer Actions	• Try to design things to be usable by as many people as possible. • Offer accessible options for everyone up-front so they don't have to say they have a disability. • Work with companies to come up with changes to be more inclusive and review resources. • Changing the job to suit the employee helps employees do well and meet standards.
Are there differences in how this might work for different kinds of employers?	• Most self-employed people with disabilities say it's very important to understand everyone has unique needs. Everyone needs different accommodations. • Many self-employed individuals found that self-employment allowed choice and control over their adjustments on a regular basis. • All employers found simple ways to make changes. The job has to be considered because sometimes you can't work from home.

3. Workplace Accommodations/Accessibility

Research Participant Quote	This quote is in relation to an employer that had an occupational therapist modify the employee's workstation during onboarding: "I have to be quite honest with you, I thought I was being placated a little bit as the token guy in a wheelchair joining the organization. So, I said to the staff, 'You really don't have to do this to me. For me, I've never had this type of accommodation done in the past. I'm pretty adaptable. I can make this happen.' What they explained to me was… 'You don't understand, we're not doing this as an onboarding practice for you. We do this for all employees that join our organization.'" (Interviewee 4)

4. Scheduling and Working Conditions

Why Is this Important for inclusion?	- Flexible schedules and jobs are a simple, cheap way to support and keep diverse employees. - Flexibility in scheduling and working conditions looks different in different sectors and job roles. Some options are being more flexible with breaks and part-time jobs or allowing continuous work time.
Employer Actions	- Allow flexibility for taking breaks or scheduling uninterrupted time. - Allow for open-ended leaves. An open-ended leave is a leave of absence without a set end date. It can be used for a variety of reasons, including illness, maternity, or other personal needs.

4. Scheduling and Working Conditions

Employer Actions	- Flexibility, such as part-time or shift work, is a good thing for people, especially people with disabilities. - Try offering job sharing, taking one full-time job and sharing it between many people instead of one person. - When possible give employees a choice to work from home, the office or a remote work site. - Let employees find the best way to do their job instead of being strict. - Make sure managers and supervisors aren't too controlling and focus on the final product. - Offer different job tasks when an employee needs a different routine. - Offer growing and learning chances to match employee interest and role.
Are there differences in how this might work for different kinds of employers?	- Most self-employed people with disabilities preferred self-employment for the flexibility, choice, and control that it offered. - Many employers who had job roles requiring employees to be on-site emphasized how shift work, job-sharing, or part-time work could offer more flexibility for people with disabilities.

4. Scheduling and Working Conditions

Research Participant Quote	"We use a job share sort of approach, which I think everybody needs to get in on that, especially in this economy and this job market. Why do you have to have one person for a full-time position… why can't that position be shared by five people? … If you can think a little outside the box and be willing to try something, maybe not quite as traditional… would you rather not have five people to fill the job that are good, and they want to be there for the hours that they're there?" (Interviewee 5)

5. Individualizing Roles

Why Is this Important for inclusion?	• Making jobs flexible to match strengths, abilities, and interests lets people with disabilities feel like they are contributing to society and gives them a sense of purpose. • Assigning roles according to the strength of individual workers. • Giving people with disabilities choice and control over how they do their jobs is important.
Employer Actions	• Let employees choose the best way for them to do their job instead of being strict. • Encourage managers not to be controlling and to focus on the outcome instead of how the person got to the outcome. • Offer different job tasks when an employee needs a different routine. A change of scenery might help productivity. • Offer growing and learning chances to match employee interest and role.

5. Individualizing Roles

Are there differences in how this might work for different kinds of employers?	• All employers agreed flexibility and changing job duties might exist on a spectrum. For example, a large employer could offer different job options to choose from and other employees could change the job to suit an employee. • No matter what size company, many employers felt focusing on outcomes and allowing for different ways of doing a job was important.
Research Participant Quote	"Yeah, just kind of in finding the gifts that we all have. I think I like to do that with all my staff. I think we're all very different. And I think that's really important. It makes business operate very smoothly when you can find, highlight, and let people work towards their strengths." (Interviewee 14)

6. Employee Wellbeing and Benefits

Why Is this Important for inclusion?	• Flexibility is very important to employee wellbeing. It creates support, trust, and safety. • Supporting employee wellbeing increases productivity and retention. • Flexibility plays an important role in employee mental health.

6. Employee Wellbeing and Benefits

Employer Actions	• Give personal days off or have mental health days in leave policies. • Give mental health first aid training for leaders. • Give time off or flexibility for medical appointments, childcare, or counselling. • Have a sick leave and health care spending account specific to people with disabilities.
Are there differences in how this might work for different kinds of employers?	• No matter what size and sector business, many employers say mental health is a big concern and all workers are affected. • Saying mental health is important is a good first step in changing attitudes and practices to be flexible and inclusive.
Research Participant Quote	"I think people are starting to understand like this is how things have to be done. You have to be flexible with childcare, people have childcare issues. People have depression where it's easier if you get them started later in the morning…This whole idea has changed about what work looks like." (Interviewee 11) "You're welcome back and to take time off because you need to focus on yourself. That's not a bad thing, and it's not anything to feel embarrassed about or feel guilty about, like it's a good thing that you can recognize that, 'Hey, you know what? I'm struggling right now, and I need some time.' So, we fully support that, and we let all the workers know… if that's what you need, you [just] have to tell us." (Interviewee 5)

7. Service Organization Partnerships

Why Is this Important for inclusion?	• Partnering with other organizations is important for accessibility and inclusion for many of the interview and focus group participants. • More than 30 unique organizations in B.C. were identified as partners. • Employers found that service organizations can provide help and support for people with disabilities with no extra cost to employers. • Sector-specific organizations (e.g., TAP Network for the technology sector, Employ to Empower for entrepreneurs in the Downtown East Side) offered supports to members and helped them see the value of inclusion.
Employer Actions	• Service organizations can do accessibility audits"that identify barriers in the workplace like policies, practices and the physical environment. • Service organizations can recommend changes and resources for employers. • Service organizations can help find and match workers with disabilities to jobs and offer continuing help to succeed such as social workers and job coaches. • Service organizations can help employer's be more diverse and reach new talent.

7. Service Organization Partnerships

Are there differences in how this might work for different kinds of employers?	- Self-employed people with disabilities say support like resources, equipment and coaching is important. - No matter what size or sector, many employers found that service organizations give resources and support needed to make successful workplace changes and accommodations for people with disabilities. - Diverse employers say understanding business needs and environment is important for successful partnerships with service organizations
Research Participant Quote	"The nice thing is having the job coaches, they are a great sounding board because every time that I need support, they're there for me as well as well as their employee or the job seeker or their person that we have here… They've been really instrumental to us as well as to the individual and some of the things that have come up that we hadn't thought of before." (Interviewee 6) "I think we were only able to hire because of the collaboration and support from... WorkBC… Being able to get the specialized equipment for our staff member… was essential, but we didn't have the budget for doing that ourselves. So, and then just learning right, learning, and providing a base support that we were able to." (Terrace Focus Group)

8. Other Employer Partnerships

Why Is this Important for inclusion?	• Local groups and other employers were helpful in sharing ideas and support for creating diversity, equity, and inclusion. • Learning from other employers is a great way to raise awareness and educate ourselves on the value of inclusive workplaces.
Employer Actions	• Meeting with local chambers of commerce to learn from inclusive employers. • Have guest speakers or "lunch and learn" to hear about success stories. • Have inclusive employer awards to share success stories. • Share ideas and problem solve with others.
Are there differences in how this might work for different kinds of employers?	• Working with others happens more with bigger employers and those in rural or remote places. • Smaller employers don't have enough people to work with others so they made a group for employers, service organizations, and interested people to make a community inclusion document. • Some smaller employers found local boards of trade can create more learning about diversity, equity, and inclusion.

8. Other Employer Partnerships

Research Participant Quote	"There was a community committee that was looking at employment… through different organizations. And so, I joined that committee, and our goal was to try to create more opportunities in the community for people with disabilities… We brought in some guest speakers. You know, go to the BIAs, the Chambers of Commerce, really trying to educate the business world in regard to hiring people with disabilities, which was great. But we weren't really changing the culture of those businesses because businesses weren't hiring people with disabilities because they didn't know how to hire people with disabilities. So, we had to sort of educate them." (Interviewee 9)

9. Addressing Barriers in the Local Community / Physical Environment

Why Is this Important for inclusion?	• Employers experienced problems with access to infrastructure, such as older buildings, sidewalks and transit, however inclusive employers found ways to solve these problems. • Employers who can choose Rick Hansen Accessibility certification. • Employers found some government help to fix accessibility in their communities but more would be better.

9. Addressing Barriers in the Local Community / Physical Environment

Employer Actions	• Giving people a ride to hard to reach jobs by making a pick-up and drop-off spot close to transit. • Working with service organizations to fix barriers in buildings. • Working with service organizations to find government funding to fix accessibility of physical environments. • Working in the community to support accessible infrastructure like buildings, sidewalks, and transit.
Are there differences in how this might work for different kinds of employers?	• Employers in small towns have barriers because of public transit and sometimes offer rides themselves to employees or organize car-pooling. • Larger employers have more resources to make buildings accessible. • One non-profit employer found that working as a group with other employers can lower costs of accessibility technology.
Research Participant Quote	"Most of [our staff] don't have a car. A lot of them don't have a license. So, for us, the challenge is finding somebody that can drive on the crew. So, we provide the transportation to and from… take them to work and then bring them back to the mall and drop them off." (Interviewee 5)