NEW INCLUSIVE ECONOMY

NIE Data Collection

Final Report

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LAUREN BROOKS-CLEATOR | SHAWN DE RAAF | NAOMI FRASER | JESSICA MCQUIGGAN

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is a non-profit research organization, created specifically to develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate new programs. SRDC's two-part mission is to help policy-makers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies.

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For more information on SRDC, contact

Social Research and Demonstration Corporation
55 Murray Street, Suite 400
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 5M3
613-237-4311 | 1-866-896-7732
info@srdc.org | www.srdc.org

Vancouver Office
890 West Pender Street, Suite 440
Vancouver, British Columbia V6C 1J9
604-601-4070

Remote offices:
Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba,
Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario,
Quebec, and Saskatchewan
1-866-896-7732

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY **1**

INTRODUCTION **4**

Research Methods 6

Analysis 12

RESEARCH FINDINGS **15**

Individual Factors 15

Interpersonal Factors 18

Organizational Factors 22

Influence of the Organizational Model 31

Community Factors 35

Structural Factors 42

SUCCESS FACTORS **50**

APPENDIX A: DIMENSIONS OF INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT **53**

REFERENCES **56**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The province of British Columbia (B.C.) has a vision of becoming the most accessible province for people with disabilities, which requires workplaces to truly embrace accessibility and inclusivity. The New Inclusive Economy (NIE) research project is dedicated to exploring the practices and factors that create genuine job opportunities for people with disabilities and aims to amplify these promising practices.

In support of the NIE project, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) led fifteen interviews and five focus groups with 43 employers and entrepreneurs across multiple sectors in B.C. This included a mix of large and small entities, from 'solopreneurs' to organizations with 100+ employees, showcasing various organizational and economic models, while prioritizing the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. The purpose of this data collection was to understand employers' experiences, documenting promising practices and uncovering enabling conditions and barriers. The goal was to understand employers' successes and challenges, while examining the broader lived experiences and societal contexts shaping disability inclusive workplaces.

During the interviews and focus groups, employers and entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals with disabilities shared many employment practices that they felt are key to attracting and retaining employees with disabilities. The findings follow a socio-ecological model that breaks down factors affecting workplace inclusion for people with disabilities into key layers: individual, interpersonal, organizational, community and structural.

Here are some of the key findings that emerged from this research:

- Lived experience of disability is a significant factor for shaping employers' orientation to disability inclusion at work. In the interviews and focus groups, lived experience included having senior leadership who identified as living with a disability, a personal connection to someone living with a disability, personally living with a disability, and having hands-on service experience with individuals with disabilities. For entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals, lived experience is a strong motivation for being self-employed or starting their businesses.

- Relationships and communication matter when it comes to inclusion. There is significant value in fostering a workplace that supports open, non-judgmental communication with employees. This can be done by having an "open-door" policy, adapting communications styles to individual needs and preferences (e.g., text messages

vs. in-person meeting or telephone), and fostering team cultures through collaboration, problem-solving and learning.

- Applying individualized approaches to employment supports inclusion. Embracing a "whole person" management ethos that values individual contributions and strengths can help to foster a disability-inclusive workplace. The emphasis is on individualized and flexible approaches that match employee needs and capabilities. For example, individualizing job roles to match abilities and interests and focusing on the skills needed for the role and not making assumptions about abilities are important aspects for shaping inclusion.

- Flexibility is a central theme for employers that are working to shape inclusion in the workplace. Inclusive HR practices, such as promoting flexible work arrangements, were seen as 'win-win' benefitting all employees, especially employees with disabilities. For example, flexible scheduling practices can include offering part-time work, allowing for regular breaks or uninterrupted work, open-ended leaves in which employees are always welcomed back, and working from home or remote work.

- Inclusive HR practices benefit all employees. Employers across different sizes, sectors, and economic models can adopt HR practices that proactively identify and remove barriers, emphasize individual strengths, and embrace flexibility. These practices can be applied to recruitment and hiring strategies, workplace accommodations, scheduling and working conditions, and the provision of employee benefits and supports. While employers may implement these practices to support employees with disabilities, they benefit the entire workforce and can improve commitment and employee retention.

- Alternative economic models that differ from mainstream economic approaches, such as solo-preneurship, co-operatives, and social enterprises, typically have organizational values that align with inclusion. Entrepreneurship can be a way for people with disabilities to exercise more control over creating a working environment that is flexible and celebrates the unique skills and abilities that their lived experience brings to their work. Co-ops are committed to participatory decision-making and community care, which fosters a positive orientation toward disability inclusion. Social enterprises are seen as attractive to employees whose values aligned with the mission of employing individuals with disabilities and overcoming employment barriers.

- Collaborative initiatives between employers and community organizations, guided by a shared understanding of business and workforce needs, promote inclusion. Other disability-serving or community organizations can help employers tap into expertise needed for identifying and removing barriers in workplace policies, practices,

and the physical environment. Leveraging local networks for idea-sharing and mutual support can help employers take diversity initiatives further.

- Government policy and legislation play a pivotal role in driving inclusion. Structural factors, including public policy and programs for employers and entrepreneurs, play a pivotal role in driving inclusion, innovation, and collaboration among employers. Accessibility legislation can encourage employers to adopt proactive measures, like accessibility committees, in anticipation of forthcoming requirements. However, government policies and programs can also present challenges for employers and entrepreneurs when it comes to government funding and eligibility criteria for people with disabilities, such as employees with disabilities receiving provincial disability assistance (PWD) or entrepreneurs who require more flexible and tailored funding supports.

- Addressing current labour market challenges requires disability inclusion. Employers, entrepreneurs, and individuals living with disabilities confirmed that inclusive workplaces are more appealing to a broader range of job seekers. When organizations promote accessibility and inclusion, they are more likely to expand their talent pool, minimize turnover, and leverage a wide range of skills, perspectives, and experiences.

The findings have direct implications for employers' strategies for recruitment and retaining talent, especially regarding people with disabilities. They also underscore the need for additional opportunities for employers to learn from one another, more coordinated and holistic approaches to employer capacity building and support for entrepreneurs, and the need to address barriers beyond the workplace in the broader environment and communities in which employers operate. Together, they provide a variety of promising practices that employers across all sectors and sizes, can immediately take up to help shape the new inclusive economy.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be an inclusive employer? How can employers increase their capacity to attract and retain employees with disabilities? The New Inclusive Economy is a research project investigating disability-inclusive employment practices in the province of British Columbia and the economic models that show promise of supporting them.

The province of British Columbia (B.C.) has a vision of becoming the most accessible province for people with disabilities, which includes employment. This vision demands more than just training people – it requires workplaces to truly embrace accessibility and inclusivity. The New Inclusive Economy research project is dedicated to exploring the practices and factors that create genuine job opportunities for people with disabilities and aims to amplify these promising practices. The project is guided by the following questions:

"What are the enabling structural conditions that create meaningful employment for people with disabilities and other barriers to employment? How can these be amplified and mobilized in other employment settings?"

The project is led by inclusion Powell River Society (iPRS), funded by the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills. The research includes a literature review by an independent researcher, an environmental scan, and illuminating case studies led by the University of British Columbia's Canadian Institute for Inclusion and Citizenship (CIIC), in collaboration with Regenerem Consulting. Interviews and focus groups with employers and entrepreneurs across multiple sectors were led by the Social Research Demonstration Corporation (SRDC). Based on learning across these research activities, the New Inclusive Economy will offer evidence-based recommendations for employers and a suite of promising practices to increase their capacity to attract and retain employees with disabilities.

This report summarizes SRDC's research findings from interviews and focus groups conducted in 2022 and 2023 with B.C. employers and entrepreneurs/ self-employed individuals with lived experience of disability. Its purpose is to highlight the key characteristics, employer practices, and conditions that support disability-inclusive workplaces across diverse sectors and regions in the province.

Social Model of Disability

The New Inclusive Economy project embraces a **social model of disability**.

Unlike the medical model, which places disability within an individual's condition, the social model redirects attention to the social and environmental barriers that prevent a person from actively and equitably participating in society (Bachrach, 2015). The **social model** asserts that it is society's barriers – not an individual's condition or differences – that lead to disability.

Societal barriers can be environmental, institutional, or attitudinal:

- **Environmental** barriers can include inaccessible infrastructure, communication barriers, and lack of services.
- **Institutional** barriers can include barriers to education, barriers to employment, and non-inclusive policies or practices.
- **Attitudinal** barriers can include negative stereotyping, lack of understanding or awareness of disability, and social isolation.

A social model of disability focuses on preventing barriers that limit people's participation in society.

RESEARCH METHODS

SRDC's data collection engaged 43 employers and entrepreneurs from diverse sectors and regions across B.C., prioritizing the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the research. This included a mix of large and small entities, from 'solopreneurs' to organizations with 100+ employees, showcasing various organizational and economic models.

The objective of the interviews was to understand the experiences and perspectives of employers and entrepreneurs from a variety of sectors, regions, and organizational structures across the province who do – or attempt to – adopt an inclusive employment model. The purpose of the focus groups was twofold: (i) to validate and further explore key themes arising from the interviews and (ii) to look at employment dynamics within specific sectors and communities to ensure data collection included a diverse array of employers.

Data Collection Overview

Recruitment
- Environmental scan survey
- Individual referrals and outreach
- Coordination with focus group organizers

Interviews
- 15 virtual interviews with employers and entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals with disabilities
- Semi-structured interview protocol

Focus Groups
- 5 virtual and in-person focus groups co-hosted with organizations
- Semi-structured focus group protocol

Analysis
- Thematic coding and analysis
- Organization and synthesis of findings

Recruitment

Interviewee recruitment and selection aimed to include a range of sectors, regions, and organizational models in the province. The environmental scan survey led by the UBC CIIC research team acted as the primary recruitment tool, providing SRDC researchers with basic demographic and inclusion data of participants indicating an interest in being contacted for future participation in the research.

The SRDC team reviewed a list of 60 employers and individuals who provided contact information. Approximately 38% of these were determined to be a) likely self-employed or b) representing the same employer. The SRDC team contacted 27 employers and individuals either by email or telephone, of which ten employers and entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals with disabilities responded.

To supplement interviewee recruitment, SRDC worked with iPRS to identify additional employers by workplace size and economic region in B.C. iPRS conducted additional targeted outreach and made referrals. SRDC coordinated follow-up activities to administer pre-interview screening questions that mirrored the environmental scan survey. Through these recruitment efforts, an additional five employers agreed to participate, for a total sample of 15 employers and entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals with disabilities.

Focus groups were co-organized with a trusted partner who could tap into their unique employer networks for participant recruitment. Priority areas included expanding representation from B.C.'s northern regions, further exploring insights from entrepreneurs with lived experience of disability, and delving deeper into sector-specific employment practices. SRDC and iPRS tapped into their professional networks to initiate outreach to various organizations. SRDC then coordinated introductory meetings and worked with these organizations to shape each focus group session. The co-organizers led participant recruitment, utilizing their connections and networks, with final confirmation by the SRDC team.

Interview Participants

Most interviewees were in the Mainland/Southwest region, although several indicated they operated on a province-wide basis. Interviewees operated in seven economic sectors. Six employers had a product or service specifically designed for people with disabilities.

Table 1 Regions

B.C. Economic Region	Number of Interviewees
Mainland/Southwest	8
Vancouver Island/Coast	1
Thompson/Okanagan	2
Kootenay	3
Cariboo	1
Northeast, North Coast & Nechako	0

Table 2 Sectors

Sector	Number of Interviewees
Accommodation and Food Services	2
Educational Services	1
Manufacturing	1
Professional Services	3
Retail and Wholesale Trade	3
Information, Culture and Recreation	3
Waste Management and Recycling	2

Interviewees represented a range of organizational models, including one co-op and one social enterprise created to employ people with disabilities and individuals facing barriers to employment. Most interviewees were from small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), including four individuals who were self-employed/entrepreneurs.

Table 3 Organizational Models

Organizational Model	Number of Interviewees
For profit	4
Not for profit	3
Co-operative	2
Public Sector/Government	1
Self-employed/entrepreneur	4
Social enterprise	1

Table 4 Employer Size

Number of employees	Number of Interviewees
Self-employed/entrepreneurs*	4
5 to 9	2
10 to 19	3
20 to 49	3
50 to 99	1
100 and over	2

*2 individuals employed a family member, one was a solopreneur, and one hired a casual/part-time help

Focus Group Participants

A total of 28 employers and entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals participated in five focus groups. One focus group was dedicated to hearing from a variety of employers within the North Coast region (Terrace, B.C.) and two focus groups were held in-person in Vancouver. The remaining focus groups were held virtually and welcomed employers located in a variety of regions in the province.

Table 5 Focus Group Descriptions

Focus Group Co-Organizer	Description	Participants
Employ to Empower	Employ to Empower works with individuals who face work and social barriers to cultivate community connections through entrepreneurship and self-advocacy opportunities. This focus group included entrepreneurs with lived experience in Vancouver's Downtown East Side to probe deeper into how entrepreneurs are creating disability inclusive environments for themselves and their communities.	7
Technology and People Network	Technology and People (TAP) Network is a peer network for People and Culture professionals in Canada's tech sector to share their learnings and best practices. This focus group was held in Vancouver to validate research findings on factors that foster disability inclusion in the tech sector, while exploring additional sectoral perspectives and contexts.	3
WorkBC Terrace	WorkBC Centre – Terrace connects job seekers and employers, helping people find jobs, explore career options, and improve their skills, while helping employers find the right talent to grow their businesses. This focus group explored inclusive employment within a specific community context and ensure data collection included employers in the North Coast region of B.C.	7
Vantage Point	Vantage Point works with non-profit organizations by convening, connecting, and equipping leaders to lift organizational capacity. This focus group validated and further explored unique considerations about non-profit organizational models, including providing front-line services to people with disabilities and other equity-deserving groups while fostering inclusive workplaces.	6
BC Alliance for Manufacturing	BC Alliance for Manufacturing is the province's largest association of manufacturers to promote dialogue and encourage collaboration and joint action amongst a variety of industry stakeholders. This focus group with manufacturing businesses, start-ups, and supporting organizations across B.C. explored additional factors on disability inclusion within the sector.	5

Procedures

A semi-structured interview protocol was designed around seven key dimensions of inclusive employment to inform a series of sub-research questions on leadership, HR practices and policies (including recruitment, hiring, benefits, and accommodations), built environment, decision-making and communications, partnerships (including partnerships with disability service organizations), measurement and accountability, and organizational values and culture (mindsets, behaviours, practices).[1] The interview protocol was then tailored for each interview participant to include the basic demographic and inclusion data of interviewees from their survey and pre-interview screening responses.

Employers and entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals were invited to participate in a virtual interview of 60 to 90 minutes in length, conducted over Zoom between October 2022 and January 2023. Interviews were conducted with two SRDC researchers (one of whom attended all 15 interviews for overall consistency).

In collaboration with co-organizers, customized semi-structured focus group protocols were developed for each session. Depending on focus group characteristics, the research team aligned questions with emerging interview findings, pinpointing areas for validation and where additional perspectives could be explored. Two focus groups were conducted in-person in Vancouver, and the remaining three focus groups were held virtually over Zoom throughout April 2023. Focus groups were facilitated and supported by two SRDC researchers.

All interview and focus group participants received a $100 e-transfer honorarium for their participation. Verbal consent was provided prior to beginning the interview or focus group and transcripts were generated verbatim from recordings or supplemented with the research team's notes in instances where recording did not occur.

1 See Appendix A for further details.

ANALYSIS

SRDC used a socio-ecological model (SEM) in the analysis. SEMs provide a way for understanding how employers are not only influenced by their immediate operational setting but also by the wider societal and environmental factors at play. It offers a holistic view, revealing different elements that shape a disability inclusive workplace – from personal attitudes to organizational policies, and the broader ways that society influences them.

For the interviews and focus groups, the research team undertook a thematic analysis of transcripts to identify patterns across the data, progressively refining research themes through coding, analysis, and review as a research team (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The research team then generated summary analysis notes with supporting quotes. The focus group analysis included an additional procedure to identify recurring themes with the interview analysis, as well as emerging sub-themes that departed from the interview analysis.

In the review and discussion of initial findings from the interview summary analysis notes, the research team elected to use a conceptual framework—a socio-ecological model (SEM)—to organize and synthesize results, which was then applied to the focus group analysis. As illustrated in Figure 3, a SEM for disability inclusive employment was created for this exercise to represent the connections, tensions, and contexts observed in the findings.

SEMs consider the dynamic relationships between individual, relational, and societal factors, revealing how one level influences another. They are a versatile tool for understanding the interplay between people, their environments, and complex social systems. While SEMs have been adopted in a variety of contexts, they generally consider the interaction between different levels. There is the societal or "macro" level (e.g., labour market, federal or provincial policies or laws, and access to resources), the more localized or "meso" level factors, such as those within an organization (e.g., hiring policies, practices, accommodations, work environment), and the individual or "micro" level (e.g., individual lived experiences, age, education). Together, SEMs unravel how different factors of context interact to grasp how individuals' experiences and outcomes vary (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

More recently, SEMs have been used to understand the experience of disability as the interaction of individual, environmental, and social factors and have been applied to understand the dynamics of diversity and inclusion in the workplace (Bond & Haynes, 2014; Purdie Greenaway & Turetsky, 2020; Simplican et al, 2014). SEMs help to illustrate how inclusion is a function of people's perceptions, attitudes, and interpersonal interactions, which are also shaped by the distribution of resources and cues embedded in the physical and social environment and vice versa (Purdie Greenaway & Turetsky, 2020).

Socio-ecological perspectives are also important in understanding disability-inclusive workplaces because they recognize that organizational issues are nested within multiple levels of context, with implications for how employers' approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) can reverberate throughout the system. In the social ecology of the workplace, SEMs recognize that the workplace is shaped by other processes across systems, while also having a profound impact on individual outcomes. At the same time, SEMs locate how people and practices can influence positive change towards DEI in their daily lives and within their broader communities (Bond & Haynes, 2014).

Figure 1 Socio-Ecological Model

Structural
Policy/legislative context, including programs/benefits; economic and labour market context; distribution of resources/wealth; ableism and discrimination

Community
Community partners, services and supports; location; accessibility of transportation, housing; community values

Organizational
Organizational structure, roles, policies & practices; products or services designed for people with disabilities

Interpersonal
Positive attitudes and behaviours towards disability and difference; communication styles; team dynamics

Individual
Age, education, employment background, lived experience, or personal connection to a person living with a disability

RESEARCH FINDINGS

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Individual factors influence behaviours, shape attitudes, and mold beliefs about disability inclusion at work. Lived experiences with disability, personal connections, professional expertise, and hands-on service experience with individuals with disabilities all play pivotal roles.

Lived Experience of Disability

The lived experience of disability was a significant factor for shaping interviewees' orientation to disability inclusion at work. All entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals noted that their lived experience influenced their work. Additionally, two other employers indicated that their organizations included leaders who identified as living with a disability, which positively influenced other interpersonal and organizational practices (e.g., team dynamics, decision-making, and organizational policies such as benefits and time off):

> *"I have a disability… It's newer for me. I think before you have a disability it's easy to be like, 'Oh yeah, that makes sense intellectually' … But if you have lived experience of what that feels like on the other end of that… it's a lot quicker to just do what you need to do what's right" (Interviewee 15)*

For the remaining employers interviewed, about half had a personal connection to someone living with a disability. These usually included close family members, but two interviewees also had previous employment experience and/or educational backgrounds in services for people with disabilities, which provided them with a deeper understanding of the process of working with services to employ people with disabilities, as well as disability-inclusive knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they brought into their work in different sectors.

Likewise, some focus group participants noted that they had a close relationship to someone living with a disability:

> *"Personally, because of my, you know, my son [who is living with a disability] … I've spent countless hours trying to develop this in our community and it just makes good business sense… yeah, it's dear to my heart." (Terrace Focus Group)*

Several interviewees also conveyed that when leaders with lived experience are willing to share their personal stories, they model individual qualities of empathy and showing vulnerability. These leadership qualities of individuals, which also included having an "open door policy," were all felt to positively contribute to a disability-inclusive workplace.

Interview and focus group participants included leaders from other equity deserving groups (e.g., individuals who self-identified as Indigenous and visible minorities). They noted that their individual experiences of facing barriers and inequality in the workplace influenced a positive orientation towards disability inclusion. Non-profit focus group participants discussed that they had made specific efforts to ensure diversity at the leadership and board level as well. Diverse representation at the leadership level was thought to address negative stereotypes and foster a personal commitment to DEI in management.

Entrepreneurs/Self-Employed Individuals with Disabilities

Interviewees who are entrepreneurs or self-employed noted that a strong motivation for being self-employed or starting their businesses was the lack of accommodation they experienced in conventional workplaces. Some conveyed previous work experiences of being under-employed or feeling undervalued. Others decided to become self-employed after a job loss. Of these four interviewees, all indicated that their negative experiences with other forms of employment shaped their motivation to work independently:

> *"We created our business to, you know, make an inclusive space that suited our needs as disabled people…. there's always some kind of pushback on… your accommodation needs. Like a lot of the times, my performance reviews would include my autistic traits as things I needed to improve continuously… it's like I literally try my best… I can't like get rid of it. Like if I could, I would not be me." (Interviewee 7)*

These interviewees noted it was important to exercise more control over creating a working environment that was flexible and celebrated the unique skills and abilities that their lived experience brought to their work. Two interviewees emphasized that part of their motivation to become self-employed or start their own business included acting as role model for other people with disabilities:

> *"I wanted to take those learnings of how I felt abandoned by the system and support people in true leadership by understanding the things that I felt that I was missing in that experience and being the kind of leader that I wished other people were being for me." (Interviewee 4)*

Entrepreneurs with disabilities in the focus group also emphasized how their personal experiences with disability motivated them to start their own businesses. They also cited reasons such as the inaccessibility of previous employers and lack of employment options, along with a desire to contribute to their communities. Like interviewees, focus group participants valued the flexibility and autonomy of self-employment, with one noting it also enabled them to prioritize personal health and recovery from an addiction over work.

These participants also discussed the complex decision of disclosing their disability to clients and partners – a choice that could open doors to new professional markets and networks, but one that wasn't always comfortable in other contexts.

Finally, living with a disability was also seen as providing entrepreneurs with a unique skillset:

> *"My challenges have given me a skillset to be creative, resourceful, and compassionate in business. I endeavour to employ at least 50% of my workforce in long term recovery from addictions and criminality." (Employ to Empower Focus Group)*

INTERPERSONAL FACTORS

Relationships matter – Interpersonal factors, including daily interactions with co-workers, supervisors, and open communication foster social support and personal growth, shaping inclusion. Flexibility and fostering psychological safety were key interpersonal factors for inclusive employers.

Open Communication

Interviewees stressed the value of open, non-judgmental communication with employees, emphasizing the importance of relationships. They provided examples, such as having an "open-door" policy, adapting communications styles to individual needs and preferences (e.g., text messages vs. in-person meeting or telephone), and fostering team cultures through collaboration, problem-solving and learning.

They also highlighted the need to respect individual communication preferences, especially for employees with specific disabilities like hearing or vision impairments. This meant involving them in decisions about communication methods (e.g., sign language vs. lip reading, choice of alternative formats for the visually impaired). Embracing an open dialogue and recognition that the experience of disability is unique to each individual were important:

> *"My number one takeaway…is always ask the person how you can best support them. Never make assumptions… They're going to know what is needed for their needs in the workplace in order to be the most successful and ultimately contribute back to your business." (Interviewee 4)*

Interviewees emphasized the importance of including people with disabilities in the decision-making process. Decisions impacting people with disabilities require their direct involvement. Interviewees discussed that people with disabilities can and want to take ownership over how they work best and what they can bring to the workplace:

> *"Talk to disabled people and listen to them and get them to make their own decisions… We need to make our own decisions because, you know, when you're making decisions for us, that's not empowerment, that's oppression still, and we need to be able to express our needs, and for those needs to be met, it's not much to ask… We just want to be like everybody else and we are like everybody else. We just work differently." (Interviewee 7)*

Focus group participants reiterated the sentiment that communication was a "two-way street" and requires feedback to ensure daily work arrangements are meeting the needs of both employees and supervisors. Ensuring employees with disabilities are included in the decision-making process was also seen as vital:

> *"Giving folks the autonomy to tell us what they need from us and what is best for them [is important]. I think a lot of folks get told what's best for them and things decided for them. So, I think having that's a big, big thing for us is sitting people down and asking them what they what their expectations are of us having an open conversation." (Vantage Point Focus Group)*

Focus group participants expanded on the importance of accessible communications, including plain language and fully accessible websites and technology. Some also highlighted the role of job coaches in tailoring communications to meet employees with disabilities needs:

> *"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)*

Employee Engagement

Given that most interviewees worked in SMEs, they emphasized that employee engagement was mostly informal through daily discussions and regular invitations for employee input. Formal structures or practices such as employee resource groups (ERGs) or employee engagement surveys were less frequently cited by interview participants.

For the employers that did use more formalized mechanisms for employee engagement, these took the form of accessibility committees or ERGs that included people with lived experience, as well as creating a standing agenda item for accessibility during regular employee meetings. Whether employers used informal or formal methods to engage their staff, many noted that their approach was centered on fostering relationships and creating a space for interpersonal support through more dialogue:

> *"I think relationships are getting deeper. People are feeling more comfortable being themselves… We're trying to… foster more dialogue and from different perspectives… I do believe there's people on the team who have a far better understanding of disability justice than I do. And so, it's a question of creating the space so that all of our voices can come to the surface, and we can really develop the vision and how to enact that vision together." (Interviewee 13)*

Some focus group participants, who included representatives from larger organizations, pointed out a common scenario: DEI responsibilities often fall to HR departments, who face a dual challenge of engaging enough employees to participate in DEI initiatives while experiencing a lack of leadership or resources to support these efforts. In for-profit settings, DEI was seen as a "nice to have" rather than a core objective, or central to day-to-day activities of employees, impacting overall engagement in accessibility and inclusion initiatives.

Management Style and Team Dynamics

Interviewees shared strategies for team management that revolved around interpersonal communications styles, a sense of psychological safety and support at work. These involved approaches that embraced a "whole person" management ethos, centering individual contributions and strengths. They emphasized individualized and flexible approaches that matched employee needs and capabilities:

> *"I think you have to know what everybody's sort of strengths and weaknesses are and find a way of helping them. Accept where people are different and similar, and work on helping them grow those things that work really well for them, but also challenging them to learn and maybe do better in areas that they struggle… That requires some flexibility on, you know, what their history is, what their needs are, even just what some of their work experience in the past might be like." (Interviewee 12)*

Interviewees emphasized management styles rooted in open and transparent interpersonal communication. Leaders were encouraged to embrace diverse viewpoints and accept mistakes as opportunities for growth. The same principles held true for entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals with disabilities, some of whom noted that they were transparent with clients and customers about how their disability may impact business outputs or timelines.

Focus group participants echoed this, emphasizing strengths-based approaches, flexibility, and openness in teams. This fostered reciprocal relationships where team members readily supported one another when the need arose:

> *"In our place, our workplace, we're so small. We're a really good team and we just really support each other, and we all have people that can back each other up when you know, if you're off sick and things like that. So, I think building that strong team." (Terrace Focus Group)*

Focus group participants highlighted the power of an open, empathetic workplace that extended beyond practical support. One employer from an organization serving people with disabilities shared that many staff and volunteers had experienced a loss of someone living with a disability.

This shared experience of grief forged a deep connection and openness among team members, enabling them to support each other and communicate their needs at work:

> *"They've connected together as a result of that shared grief, and they're very open… People are very open about their life situations and are able to share what's happening with them and what they need, which is really helpful for me in order to support them as I can." (Vantage Point Focus Group)*

ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS

Organizational factors, including the rules, policies, structures, and supports that employers engage with both formally and informally shape workplace inclusion. Employers across different sizes, sectors, and economic models adopted HR practices that proactively identify and remove barriers, emphasize individual strengths, and embrace flexibility.

Mission and Values

One third of interviewees had a specific product or service designed for the disability community or built into their operational model (e.g., they only employ people with disabilities), which shaped their organizational mission and values. For the most part, these were not public facing. Instead, accessibility and inclusion were seen as simply "the way we operate," integrated organically into workplace values. Many focus group participants also agreed that organizational mission was central to driving inclusion or noted that their commitment to DEI in general was also an important factor.

Entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals with disabilities made inclusion a core mission to normalize and advocate for people with disabilities as employable. Participants in the entrepreneurs' focus group shared how their missions were deeply tied to their lived experience and the desire to break down employment barriers.

For those interviewees with formal diversity and inclusion statements, these set the tone and ensured consistency in organizational practices. A major employer went further, embedding accessibility and inclusion goals into organizational models, strategy, and culture to drive organizational decisions:

> *"Why we've been successful is because we've been able to embed all… key sort of strategies, you know, KPIs, et cetera, within all our plans… So, some of the biggest strategies have that language of being inclusive. So that also ties into our overall sort of being an inclusive employer. So that's sort of why we've been successful… because we've embedded it into these sorts of strategies." (Interviewee 9)*

However, not all interviewees felt that a formal policy or public-facing statement was beneficial. As one entrepreneur with disability conveyed, diversity inclusion statements can be limiting and that putting the person first was a better approach:

> *"We're big believers on treating people like people and putting the person first. I think that sometimes people get so lost in the literature of feeling as though they have to have this all- encompassing diversity inclusion statement that makes sure that you cover all aspects. But the danger in making sure that you're covering every subset is that you may miss a subset. And so [we]…throw the labels away." (Interviewee 4)*

For one focus group participant from a service organization for people with disabilities, a demonstrated commitment to their mission meant prioritizing the representation of people with disabilities at all levels, including at the board of directors, the employee level, and in public-facing roles:

> *"Even when I do presentations, I always try to bring somebody to speak for themselves. I'm not speaking for people, but with people… making sure that the work that we're doing is accessible and is [ensuring] those accommodations to have more people at the table, more voices, the better work we can do. (Vantage Point Focus Group)*

In both the interviews and focus groups, few participants had formal accessibility plans or DEI goals set in policy. Many interviewees from SMEs lacked codified practices but expressed intentions to work on this in the future. Some focus group participants were initiating steps like policy reviews and setting up accessibility committees. While these practices were viewed as beneficial, only a couple discussed commitments to measure progress or adopt tools such as the Presidents Group's Inclusive Employer Self-Assessment to formalize accessibility and inclusion within their organizations.

Inclusive Human Resources Practices

Interviews dug deep into inclusive HR practices, covering recruitment, accommodations, benefits, tailoring job roles to the individual, professional development, and retention. Interviewees were also asked to comment on the extent to which any of these practices were easy to operationalize and why, as well as the challenges they faced. Given that interviewees who were entrepreneurs or self-employed usually had no employees or employed a single individual (either family member or contracted), questions were tailored for this unique context.

Focus groups validated interview themes across sectors, organizational models, and regions. Together, interviewees and focus group participants identified a range of practices, described in further detail below.

Recruitment and Hiring

Many interviewees noted that they had reviewed recruitment and hiring policies and practices to remove barriers and highlight the organization's values of inclusion. Practices included looking

for specific barriers in job applications, including language, reading level, and technological barriers common in off-the-shelf recruitment platforms. Many also added diversity statements and processes to "screen in" candidates who self-identified as living with a disability directly into an interview:

> *"When we're hiring, we publish the salary range, we publish detailed list of benefits, vacation, all of those things… That's still not standard… It's a real range of groups who do that, but we feel like that's a part of inclusion. We ask if people need specific accommodations during the hiring process, and we're doing really simple things like now, for the most part, we give people the interview questions in advance." (Interviewee 2)*

Interviewees engaged in targeted recruitment of people with disabilities and other barriers to employment, either by design of their organizational model (i.e., social enterprise created solely to employ people with disabilities) or through partnerships with service organizations to target specific roles to be fulfilled by people with disabilities. Entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals with disabilities conveyed that if they were in a position to hire, they would prioritize hiring from the disability community, emphasizing strengths that people with disabilities bring to the job (e.g., loyalty, commitment, attention to detail).

One interviewee had workplace champions for hiring people with disabilities in each department, finding this a highly effective way to operationalize inclusive HR practices. Another made it mandatory for all hiring managers to collaborate with community organizations to recruit people with disabilities. Beyond these practices, many interviewees said that they hire for the best fit, but value diverse talent pools.

Focus group insights confirmed this approach to hiring, but also raised that it was important to reconsider job requirements. They stressed the importance of skill-focused job descriptions, removing unnecessary training or education criteria when appropriate, favouring learning on the job:

> *"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)*

Transparency was a recurring theme. Being upfront about physical tasks and requirements, communicated in plain language, was crucial. Focus group participants emphasized personalized recruitment, moving away from batch hiring and onboarding to more individualized approaches. Focus groups also noted hiring practices such as working with service organizations to ensure that job postings reached a diversity of prospective employees, or shifting away from the use of

cover letters in favour of a screening survey that made it more accessible for applicants. Some also noted the importance of choice in job applications – whether that be online or in person.

Interviewees and focus groups provided examples of revamping job interviews for inclusivity, such as sharing interview questions in advance. One interviewee went further with a low-barrier process, eliminating formal interviews and reference checks. Another introduced working interviews, where candidates are invited to showcase their skills directly on the job. The employer emphasized that the working interviews allow both the candidate and the employer to collaborative gauge job fit:

> *"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 and into how that would translate to what we needed as well as the individual." (Interviewee 6)*

Workplace Accommodations

Most interview participants provided accommodation on a case-by-case basis, aligning them with individual needs and job requirements. For example, while many noted that they would provide worksite accommodations (e.g., assistive technology, workstation modifications) or adjust working conditions (e.g., work from home and other flexible work arrangements), these were weighed against job roles, especially those with public-facing or physically demanding aspects. In general, interviewees were guided by a focus on flexibility and support to empower employees to meet their role-specific requirements.

Focus group participants shared this approach, providing accommodation on a case-by-case basis and emphasizing that support should be available to employees as soon as they are requested. The focus group with technology sector employers also discussed ways to proactively inform new hires about accommodation options to reduce the need for self-disclosure and to foster a welcoming environment.

Interviewees with lived experience emphasized the value of consulting with accessibility experts, not only for employees with disabilities, but all new hires. One interviewee shared a standout example: an employer provided personalized occupational therapist consultations for every new hire to fine-tune their workspace:

> *"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)*

Focus group participants also acknowledged the diversity within the disability community, emphasizing that support and accommodations must be as unique as individuals themselves. Participants in the focus group with entrepreneurs shared their varied needs, emphasizing the importance of dispelling a 'one size fits all' approach.

Flexibility and Employee Wellbeing

Flexibility was a central theme for all employers. Interview and focus group participants agreed that all employees come with their own strengths and needs. Inclusive HR practices, such as promoting flexible work arrangements, were seen as 'win-win' benefitting all employees, especially employees with disabilities.

Scheduling and Working Conditions

Several examples of flexible scheduling were found during interviews and focus groups, including offering part-time work (and allowing an employee to shift to full-time if they decide to), allowing for regular breaks or uninterrupted work, open-ended leaves in which employees are always welcomed back, and working from home or remote work (though it was acknowledged that this is not feasible for all roles). Trusting employees to work when and where they choose was highlighted. Focus group participants emphasized the importance of flexibility for neurodivergent individuals, allowing them more control over their individual work environments. Manufacturing sector participants saw part-time and shift work as healthy options, and service organizations agreed that non-full-time employment was compatible with client needs.

One employer noted the benefits of a job-sharing pilot program, in which a role that was traditionally filled by one full-time employee was shared among multiple part-time employees. It was noted that part-time work can be especially important for those with barriers to employment, who may struggle to maintain a consistent 40-hour work week:

> *"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)*

Entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals with disabilities in the interviews emphasized that self-employment allowed for greater flexibility – both in scheduling and in their work environment. Some noted how rigid or restrictive working conditions in previous employment served as a motivation to become self-employed:

> *"I think the most inclusive employment is self-employment. I can sleep when I want to sleep. If I'm overstimulated, I can turn off all my lights. If I need to take a break for a few hours or come back to it another day, I have that flexibility." (Interviewee 1)*

This point was emphasized in the focus group with entrepreneurs with disabilities, where having autonomy and flexibility over their own schedules allowed them to prioritize healthcare needs in their lives over work.

Individualizing Roles to Employees' Strengths

Interviewees highlighted how tailoring jobs to match abilities and interests promotes inclusion. Focusing on the skills needed for the role and not making assumptions about abilities were noted as important aspects of this factor. For task-based roles, allowing employees to find their best approach was preferred over strict instructions. Encouraging middle management to adopt individualized, not micromanagement, approaches was seen as fostering inclusion and retention. Individualized recruitment, onboarding, and communication styles were also noted.

One large employer offered a "menu" of job options for individuals to choose from. Another workplace, mainly employing people with disabilities, customized roles based on values and interests, adapting duties when necessary. For instance, on a challenging day, employees could assist with offsite deliveries for a "change of scenery." Another interviewee noted that job descriptions were tailored to align with career goals, promoting transitions to permanent roles to foster retention:

> *"I feel like we're just like one of the pieces in the puzzle… For some people… it's transitional employment like it's kind of a stepping-stone just to get them back in it… We don't have a thing where… 'you stay for six months and then you have to move on to something else.' Well, no, I think that's dumb. Like, if I have somebody really good that wants to stay on and, you know, help grow the business, then great. But you don't have to, either. It's again, we're meeting people where they're at, right?" (Interviewee 5)*

Employers noted how individualizing roles to employees' strengths and interest can also positively impact business operations:

> *"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)*

Navigating Work Beyond the Full-Time Model

Focus group participants stressed the importance of flexibility and customizing roles for inclusivity. However, they faced challenges in deviating from the dominant full-time equivalent (FTE) employment model. This included difficulties in accommodating reduced workloads, tailoring job responsibilities, and implementing job-sharing due to time and resource constraints. Addressing employees' needs for reduced workloads also posed dilemmas, as reallocating tasks to others was often tricky. This was particularly challenging in specialized roles, such as management positions, where duties could not easily be reassigned to multiple staff members.

> *"I think the flexibility comes from the team that is able to step in and also the planning. So right now, I have people that can sub in, so I have maybe people that are doing similar jobs that if one person is not there, the other person can step in. But in terms of management or [when] somebody is not able to do that work, then it falls on the leader's shoulders. So often I think the staff that recognizes that flexibility is important for them, and then they also give it to others and support each other. But again, I cannot necessarily expect people to do that all the time. So then often it lands on my plate." (Terrace Focus Group)*

Some focus group participants also described how implementing flexible and inclusive practices required more time and effort, which was difficult for employers with limited resources. In particular, publicly funded and non-profit organizations emphasized that they did not have the financial means to hire more staff who could take on this workload:

> *"We're reliant on what the province and what our municipality gives us [for funding]. So, we don't have a lot of extra funding. And we're staffed at like our bare bones level, right? Like if I could hire one or two more full-time staff, that would be really great. And so unfortunately for us, sometimes it comes into that accommodation, and if an accommodation means that other people are going to have to take on more work. It's not that we don't want to, it's that we just can't, right?... It's finding that balance of how do we make this work, not just for that one person who needs that accommodation, but for everybody else who has to pick up that extra work? And unfortunately, because of our staffing level, we don't have a lot of that extra time to do that work." (Terrace Focus Group)*

To address the challenges of navigating alternatives to the FTE model, employers emphasized the need for more sector-specific examples (e.g., tech sector) of how alternatives could be implemented in their organizations.

Employee Wellbeing, Benefits and Additional Supports

Many employers noted that the above examples positively impact employee wellbeing, which, beyond benefiting employees, enhances productivity and retention across their organizations. Flexibility embodies a culture of support, trust, and safety, as interviewees highlighted. Many mentioned a growing focus on employee wellbeing through additional personal days, extended leaves, and improved mental health benefits. Implementing these as policies addressed issues of "fairness," reducing conflicts when coworkers required time off. A flexible work culture minimized the idea that time off was an "infraction," which could also reduce the need for employees to disclose confidential or sensitive issues:

> *"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)*

Employers cited mental health and wellbeing support through various means, such as paying a living wage, organizing morale-boosting events like summer parties, and providing mental health first aid training for leaders. Essential support could also include work from home allowances, cell phone allowances, or free uniforms. Interviewees varied in terms of whether these were provided as extra benefits compared with some who saw them as crucial investments

to sustain operations. However, those opting for informal support recognized the need for a dedicated mental health budget.

Focus groups echoed the importance of employee wellbeing, emphasizing flexibility and support for all. Non-profit organizations stressed the significance of paid sick days and health care spending accounts, especially for employees with disabilities, whose needs often extend beyond typical benefits coverage.

> *"If you have a majority of staff who have disabilities, they're going to go through like the $500 limit for physiotherapy really quickly. So, health spending accounts gives them freedom to use it where they need [including] additional counseling sessions and things like that." (Vantage Point Focus Group)*

INFLUENCE OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

Employers represented diverse organizational models: solopreneurs, co-operatives, social enterprises, non-profits, and for-profits. They shared insights on how their unique organizational models and economic approaches contribute to their inclusive work practices.

The term "alternative economies" describes the differences within the economy, which include processes of production, ownership, labour, exchange, and consumption that differ from mainstream approaches.[2] A key aspect of the interviews and focus groups was to explore these differences and to understand employers' perspectives and approaches to disability inclusion from this "alternative" or "diverse economies" perspective.

While only a few interviewees felt their organizational model significantly impacted their accessibility and inclusion practices, most could identify how their model aligned with inclusive values. Smaller organizations and self-employed individuals highlighted flexibility and adaptability in addressing individual needs. Entrepreneurs with disabilities valued heading their own business as a way to honour their disability experiences.

Co-ops emphasized their commitment to participatory decision-making and community care, fostering a positive orientation toward disability inclusion. Social enterprises were seen as attractive to employees whose values aligned with the mission of employing individuals with disabilities and overcoming employment barriers. For these interviewees, such alternative economic models focused on generating social value, not just profits, which could positively benefit inclusive practices:

> *"I think it's really important to encourage more social enterprises to happen because… your profit isn't going into the pockets of like a CEO or a board or whatever… I think there's a shift in attitude that really has to happen… Being a part of a social enterprise, I didn't even know what it was until I started working here… you're not here to get rich, you're here to help… I think it would be nice if there was more of that in the world. But again, it's it takes certain people, you know, corporations are always going to be*

2 Healy (2009) outlines that 'alternative economies' can be traced to an approach to the study of the fundamental nature and structure of the (capitalist) economy as a "space of difference". Alternative economies refer to scholarship rooted in human geography that explores these differences and the possibilities for more inclusive and sustainable approaches to economics that sit outside of traditional capitalist processes and its institutions.

> *corporations and can't change that. I think all we can do is just encourage more people to… think about like social things or environmental things." (Interviewee 5)*

Some interviewees from non-profits with a social mission shared the view that organizational values drove their inclusive employment efforts. However, one interviewee noted that non-profits also faced challenges with respect to resources and centralized decision-making necessary to drive inclusion. The interviewee felt that larger organizations could mandate accessibility, but smaller organizations, including non-profits and co-operatives, lacked resources, expertise, and centralized decision-making authority. Another interviewee also noted that when non-profits provide essential services or help vulnerable populations, they experience a tension where the organization's focus on helping people in crisis can overshadow internal efforts to be more inclusive of their own employees. The interviewee noted one way to address this dynamic is for non-profits to support one another to build DEI capacity across the non-profit sector.

Focus groups explored how alternative economic models affected attitudes and practices towards disability-inclusive employment. Like interview findings, flexibility for entrepreneurs with disabilities was central to what those focus group participants considered inclusive employment. Non-profit focus group participants also shared the view that an organization's mission and values had more influence in driving inclusion as opposed to their economic model:

> *"I think it depends on, you know, the purpose and mission and vision of the organization, more so versus whether you're a non-profit or not, perhaps, you know, in terms of your commitment to accessibility, diversity, equity, inclusion… I don't know how that [inclusion] connects necessarily to non-profits with completely different mandates… I'm not convinced that… the non-profit status would necessarily make a difference." (Vantage Point Focus Group)*

Likewise, small business owners conveyed that being inclusive was fueled in part by their business mission, values, and personal commitment to their community. While this drove their inclusion efforts, it also brought emotional and operational challenges, as well as high expectations to address employee needs, which were challenging for small business owners to address:

> *"Our company is family owned and operated… I've been involved for pretty much my entire life. And how many times have I thought over the past couple of years, especially with COVID like man, I just want to go work for McDonald's because I don't have to take it home with me at the end of the day versus… that emotional load is just on my shoulders trying to keep people working and surviving and thriving… I know that… I shouldn't be able to do everything, and it's not my responsibility, but when I've also got parents and caregivers coming to me for answers, it can be challenging." (Manufacturing BC Focus Group)*

Rather than organizational or economic models driving inclusion, focus group participants noted that their model influenced the nature of their stakeholders and those interactions. Non-profits felt the weight of the accountability and financial transparency requirements that come with public funding. By contrast, in the tech sector, non-publicly traded companies enjoyed greater decision-making flexibility without the burden of accountability to shareholders. Social enterprises grappled with the pressure to demonstrate "impact" to stakeholders, that often prioritized quantity over the nuanced impact of quality employment:

> *"If you have an impact business, your bigger numbers are always much more exciting than your smaller numbers. And if you have someone who's going to work there continually, that's a small number of people that you helped. If you can train people, turn them out, and train someone else, that's a bigger number. And anyone looking at your impact page is much more excited about the bigger numbers than the smaller numbers… Customers who want to support a business that's doing good in the world [may think] three employees… who have disabilities [and] have been with us for 10 years is less exciting than [if] we've helped 50 women who've come into this country find another job." (Manufacturing BC Focus Group)*

Sectoral Perspectives

Often, interviewees spoke of sectoral and organizational considerations together. For example, interviewees in sectors that provide services to the public or that receive public funding held similar views that their workplaces should reflect the diversity of the broader public also. The interview participant from the public sector noted that it was not the organizational model, but new requirements under the Accessible BC Act, which drove accessibility and inclusion.

Further insights from focus group participants included the following sectoral perspectives:

- Technology sector barriers to inclusive employment included the fast-paced nature of the field as well as the current economic climate of mass layoffs, which makes disability-inclusion employment practices a lower priority for HR professionals.
- Participants in the manufacturing focus group highlighted both challenges and opportunities to inclusive employment in their sector. Employers at worksites with heavy equipment expressed challenges with finding accessible equipment and the knowledge of how to make such environments safe for persons with disabilities. On the other hand, many acknowledged that the repetitive nature of some tasks allows some persons with disabilities to thrive, and the clear division of tasks on an assembly line provides ample training and development opportunities.

- Focus group participants from non-profit and public sectors mentioned the constraints posed by public funding requirements, often providing little flexibility for accommodations and alternative employment models.

- Entrepreneurs, on the other hand, see self-employment as the most flexible type of work, though focus group participants frequently felt that the supports for entrepreneurs with disabilities were unclear or difficult to navigate, compared to those for persons with disabilities in "traditional" workplaces.

COMMUNITY FACTORS

Employers value partnerships with community service organizations rooted in a shared understanding of business and workforce needs. Community factors are also at play in how employees navigate both the physical and social environment, and how these shape inclusive behaviours in the workplace.

Partnerships

Partnerships with other organizations were pivotal for accessibility and inclusion for many of the interview and focus group participants from a variety of organizational models. More than 30 unique organizations in B.C. were identified as partners. Employers detailed diverse partnerships and how they fueled inclusive employment. Partnership dynamics varied based on organizational models and workplace structures, and focus groups delved deeper into what makes these partnerships thrive.

Service Organizations

Interviewees and focus group participants partnered with disability-serving or community organizations to foster workplace inclusion. They tapped into these organizations' expertise for accessibility audits, identifying barriers to address in workplace policies, practices, and the physical environment. The extent of accessibility audits varied, but included document reviews (e.g., strategic plans, HR policies, and board materials), employee surveys, leadership reports, and forming accessibility committees.

The President's Group, Neil Squire Society, and Open Door Group were frequently cited as service organization partners in both interviews and focus groups, in addition to local organizations across the province. These organizations offer a range of expertise, from the strategic level, to ensuring that employers can access specific expertise to accommodate new employees:

> *"And then we've also worked with Neil Squire, some of the other community organizations…to adapt their workspace if they need to or if they need any support coming in to do any of the testing. We can bring in that sort of support. So, we would sort of make sure that set up the individual before they come in." (Interviewee 9)*

Focus group participants also raised the importance of sector-specific organizations that provide capacity building support. Focus group co-organizers Employ to Empower and the Technology

and People Network were noted as examples that provided tailored supports to their members and helped employers see the value of inclusion.

Supported employment services for people with disabilities in securing and maintaining work was highlighted by a range of interview and focus group participants, who valued their partnerships with local service organizations, such as in the community living sector or with local WorkBC offices.

Interviewees who predominantly employ people with disabilities frequently worked closely with social workers and service providers to support employees and create individual employment plans. For example, WorkBC providers can help with recruitment and onboarding. Working closely with service providers helped new employees thrive in their new role:

> *"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)*

In some cases, interviewees and focus group participants worked with service organizations to broaden and diversify recruitment, while ensuring that the organization continued to help with employees' essential skills development with supports on the job. Partnerships also fostered shared problem-solving, provided expertise on accessible technology and equipment, and enhanced employers' inclusion skills by offering fresh perspectives and adaptable approaches:

> *"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)*

Interviewees and focus group participants extolled the merits of partnering with service organizations and expressed a keen interest in expanding community collaborations. Non-profit interviewees frequently joined forces with local organizations to bolster fundraising and secure grants, leveraging existing community expertise and relationships. Some interviewees expressed their eagerness to forge stronger community bonds, such as conducting local outreach to explore partnership potential. One interviewee, whose organization primarily employs people with disabilities and serves vulnerable populations, aspired to create a "one-stop shop" by partnering with service providers to benefit both employers and service clients.

Interviewees emphasized the value of cultivating enduring relationships over one-time partnerships, noting the role of trust between organizations. While acknowledging the time

investment, interviewees highlighted the potential for lasting and far-reaching impacts. Some saw these collaborations as necessary to achieve collective goals beyond what any single organization could achieve alone:

> *"We're not going to change the world on our own, but you can certainly do something in our local community and we're not doing it alone. Like, you know, we work with lots of different people that have the same sort of ideals." (Interviewee 5)*

Focus group participants stressed the importance of time-tested relationships in fostering successful partnerships, where service organizations comprehend employers' business and workforce requirements. One participant noted that their local service organization had shifted its focus from job seekers to engaging with employers, promoting workplace inclusion.

Entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals with disabilities also highlighted the value of direct support, including funding for equipment, business coaching, and providing an opportunity to participate in conferences. One interviewee who provided consulting services also highlighted the benefits of tapping into community experts to enhance and expand their offerings:

> *"So, we very much lean on partners …we will go to those experts first as opposed to just assuming that we know what we're doing and get their documentation, resources, things of that nature. So, I think it's really important to have a healthy relationship with the experts in the community… if I didn't have that training and knowledge and expertise given to me by partners… I wouldn't be able to speak to those things outside of my own lived experience." (Interviewee 4)*

Employer Communities of Practice

Some interviewees actively participated in communities of practice, utilizing local networks for idea-sharing and mutual support in diversity initiatives. This was more prevalent among larger employers, as well as those in rural or remote areas. In the public sector, one interviewee fostered inclusive employment by creating an award for local employers. They promoted their achievements on social media and collaborated with Chambers of Commerce to educate local business leaders on hiring people with disabilities:

> *"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)*

Some non-profit interviewees took active roles in advisory groups across various sectors and contributed to building capacity in other organizations. For instance, one interviewee facilitated the development of a board member pipeline for individuals with disabilities, offering coaching and training to ensure their confidence and effectiveness. Partnerships emerged as a pivotal element in inclusive employment for all interviewed employers. They provided a valuable resource for employers with limited inclusion experience or capacity, as well as for those well-versed in inclusive employment, fostering connections with like-minded organizations.

However, establishing these partnerships wasn't always straightforward, and staff turnover occasionally disrupted established relationships, requiring a fresh start with new contacts. Some small businesses acknowledged their capacity limitations for participating in communities of practice, and employers in smaller communities faced resource constraints for engaging in multiple initiatives. To address these challenges, one participant in a small community spoke of a partnership network working towards a community-wide inclusion charter. While focus group participants valued partnerships with service organizations, they highlighted the need for more networking opportunities through local Boards of Trade and start-up accelerators:

> *"There is advocacy there, but there isn't a community of business owners that I would go and talk to about these problems... So, I don't have a good solution there, but I can definitely tell you where there are places where I orbit… where those resources I would probably get to. (Manufacturing BC Focus Group)*

Community Values and Public Accountability

Interview participants revealed a dynamic interplay between community values and public accountability in shaping their commitment to inclusive employment. While most lacked formal accountability or reporting mechanisms, many felt compelled to uphold their reputation as inclusive employers and fulfill their duty to the disability community. This commitment extended to external communications, such as maintaining accessible websites and participating in community events and celebrating diversity on social media platforms.

For some, their reputation as an inclusive employer served as a cornerstone of their public value proposition. For example, one entrepreneur who provides services for people with disabilities said:

> *"I think it would take our expertise down a number of pegs if we weren't doing the things that we were encouraging other organizations to do… the reason that we're able to operate so well is because people recognize that we're not just talking about [accessibility], we're being about it… It's through our actions that that really speaks for itself, which has enabled us to potentially get jobs over other organizations that are similar." (Interviewee 4)*

Interviewees noted that developing a reputation as an inclusive employer brings both benefits and added responsibility. In small communities, interviewees noted how they developed a reputation as an inclusive employer through word-of-mouth, where community members, schools, and businesses were familiar with them. For others, an orientation towards inclusion provided a competitive advantage over similar organizations in attracting customers. Building a reputation as an inclusive employer also resulted in being sought out by potential employees that wanted to work with them, reducing the burden of recruiting new staff.

This public perception of being an inclusive employer reinforced the values in the community, which further drove inclusion organizationally:

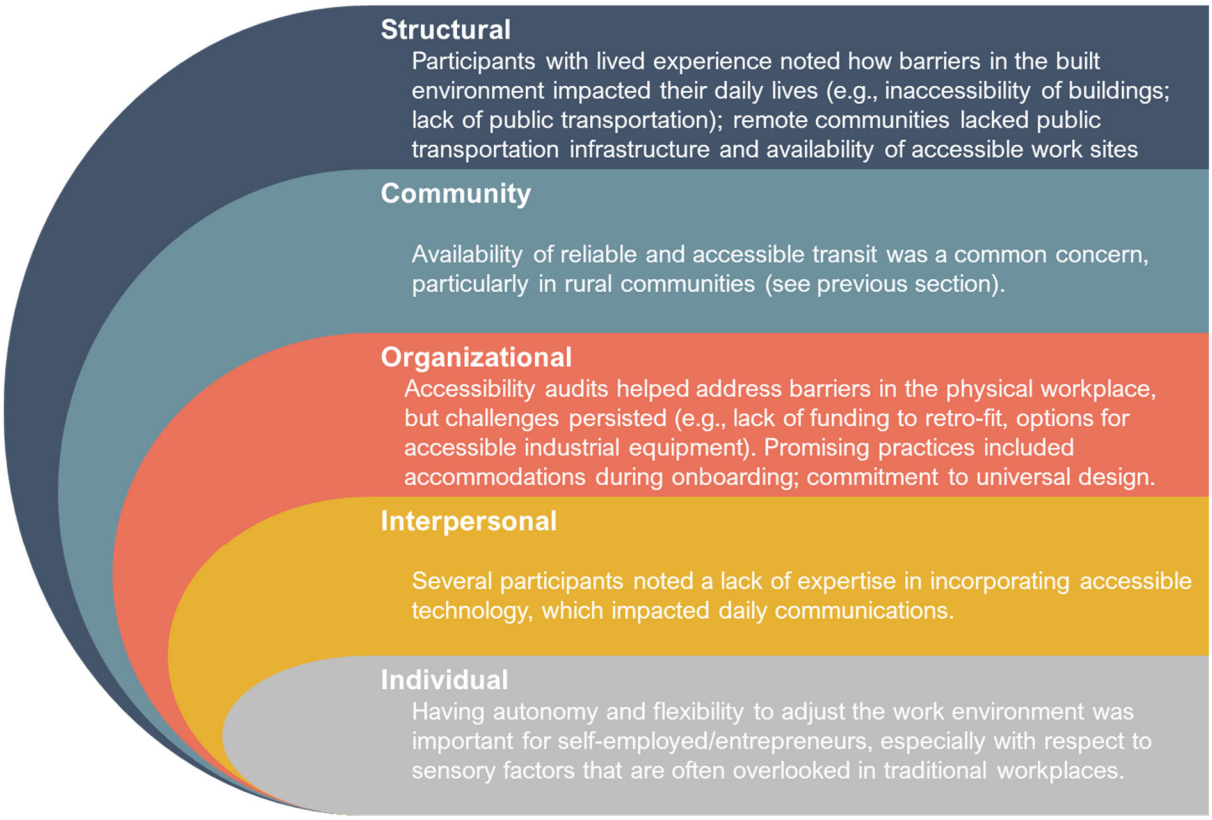
> *"We want our staff to have a good attitude coming to work every day and being open and willing to learn. And that also reflects on us as leaders of the business as well as within the community. We have to be open to other opportunities to grow our business, as well as to grow our staff." (Interviewee 6)*

Fostering community values or conversations regarding inclusion also played a role. An employer noted that their training for newcomers to Canada was also aligned with local social and cultural inclusion expectations. In the arts sector, the celebration of individuality spurred conversations about addressing the disability community's needs and gaps. Similarly, focus group participants observed a community-wide embrace of inclusion as "good business sense." They recognized a broader social trend highlighting the value of inclusion, acknowledging its long-term financial benefits for the community.

Physical Accessibility in the Community

While barriers in the built environment were a significant factor at the community level, responses identified the accessibility of the built environment across personal, interpersonal, organizational, and broader societal or structural factors as well (shown in Figure 4).

Figure 2 **Accessibility of the Built Environment Across Factors of the Socio-Ecological Model**



While physical accessibility was a pervasive issue across each level of the socio-ecological model, specific concerns were noted at the community level. Employers' community location and the availability of accessible transit were recurrent concerns. One employer questioned the suitability of transportation options in rural areas and raised doubts about their feasibility in even smaller or remote communities:

> *"I know some of the other [communities we work in] do not have a taxi and no bus. [A community organization has] a volunteer service that will help clients with disabilities to get to work or appointments if needed. But I don't know how regular, like if that's just, you know, a few times or I don't know if it would be OK that 'I'll take this person to work every day for the next year'." (Interviewee 3)*

Expanding small businesses in less central community areas posed transit challenges. Due to zoning and rising real estate costs in city centers, businesses often relocated to areas with limited or no public transit and inadequate pedestrian infrastructure, creating difficulties for employees

without a driver's license. One employer addressed this by offering transportation from their new location to a central hub, facilitating employee connections to other transit options:

> *"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)*

Reliable public transportation was a widespread issue with interviewees, often overlooked by organizations in urban areas. Some interviewees noted how disability-serving organizations in the Lower Mainland failed to acknowledge physical accessibility challenges in remote communities, and that this could be a point of tension when working with them.

In northern communities, focus group participants described the impacts of insufficient public infrastructure, including transportation, parking, and sidewalk maintenance, and how accessibility options were further reduced when municipalities attempted upgrades:

> *"A few years ago, they re-did the street in front of our office, and I had a client that… needed a walker and we had to get them to park across the street… It was really, really, really challenging while they were working on our street. But even now that the streets fixed are still there, there's no parking lot for the clients… As far as anybody working on a Sunday in our town, there's no bus service on a Sunday and our taxi service is not reliable. So that's another thing that I would add to just the community in general. (Terrace Focus Group)*

With respect to what employers could influence over their own environments, many opted for Rick Hansen Accessibility Certification, but recognized the financial and time investment required for building accessibility enhancements. A northern employer found that certification both facilitated compliance with COVID-19 distancing regulations and they were able to access government funding support. By contrast, an urban employer shared the challenge of locating an accessible site near public transit, a process taking nearly a year.

Additionally, a focus group participant emphasized the need to address accessible technology in the workplace, suggesting potential collective solutions that are both inclusive and open source:

> *"We went through a process of assessment last year for accessible office suites and sadly there are no open source accessible office suites, which is a real drag… our staff who are really philosophically and fundamentally aligned with an open source mission… that is not accessible at the moment, so we're going to have to pay… that got me wondering about the possibility for provincial support or some support for consortia licensing… it strikes me that there's a possible role, not just for that tool, but for other accessible tools within the online landscape." (Vantage Point Focus Group)*

STRUCTURAL FACTORS

Public policy and programs play a pivotal role in driving inclusion, innovation, and collaboration among employers. As current labour market realities are pushing employers to consider untapped talent, employers and entrepreneurs grapple with overcoming complex barriers and investing in the long-term retention of their employees.

Policy

Drivers

Interviewees and focus group participants highlighted the significant impact of accessibility legislation, both federal and provincial, on their disability-inclusive practices. Some adopted proactive measures, like accessibility committees, in anticipation of forthcoming requirements. Others recognized that compliance with these requirements was not only essential, but also good practice for business.

In the technology sector, requests for proposals that included DEI criteria were identified as drivers of inclusion. This led some employers to view disability inclusion as a competitive advantage over larger competitors. Moreover, focus group participants thought that the government should lead by example, promoting barrier-free employment practices within these institutions to set a positive precedent for the private sector:

> *"I think ways government can make things better is by… practicing what they preach… they should be showcasing that as well within their own… places of employment. And I think that would really showcase that the government is taking it seriously and that people with disabilities can and do want to work and have the level of skill and ability to be able to do so." (Vantage Point Focus Group)*

Some participants proposed innovative ways for the government to incentivize disability-inclusive employment and accessibility solutions. Ideas included government procurement preferences, licensing considerations, and financial incentives. One suggestion was an incentive structure where the government would cover mandated employment contributions (e.g., workers' compensation, pension, insurance) if organizations met specific diversity representation thresholds.

Challenges

Interviewees and focus group participants faced multiple challenges related to government funding and eligibility criteria for people with disabilities. Some noted difficulties in supporting employees with disabilities receiving provincial disability assistance (PWD), who often chose part-time or contract roles. Employers speculated that they may do so because of the episodic nature of a disability or wanting a sense of security regarding the benefits provided to them. Interviewees highlighted that self-selection into non-full-time, permanent employment impacted the employer's ability to enroll them into the organization's benefit programs and pensions. Navigating the annual earnings exemption for individuals working and receiving disability assistance also posed challenges:

> *"I can't pay them more, which always sucks. I don't think that's fair at all, that there's an income cap because it's just with PWD… Sometimes… they're good, they're on a roll, they're doing really well and then other times, not so much... I think for a lot of them, it's kind of like that fall back just in case… It sucks that [it] can be taken away if they… make too much money, go over." (Interviewee 5)*

Focus group participants also faced challenges assisting employees with PWD navigate decisions regarding their employment and their benefits. One participant noted that the misconception that people with disabilities will lose their benefits designation if they exceed income caps is widespread[3] which results in more work and effort from employers to help educate employees and navigate decisions:

> *"When people who are on PWD come and apply for our jobs and we hire them, there's always this navigation that we go through with them… because they don't want to necessarily make too much… [and] no longer be eligible for PWD because they're put in a situation of legislated poverty where they're like… 'I know that I could make more but what if my disability gets worse?... What if I lose this job? … What do I do next?' So, we work with them on that, and we try to be as flexible as possible, but that also drives our work up. It is like trying to support people where they're at with employment, in whatever way that looks like. For them, understanding that disability is not a monolith… it can be permanent, it can be episodic and be temporary." (Vantage Point Focus Group)*

3 In B.C., the purpose of a Person with Disabilities (PWD) designation is for individuals to access assistance or programs under the Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act. Recipients retain the PWD designation whether or not they continue to be financially eligible for disability assistance. They are not required to apply for the designation on reapplication for assistance. (For details, see: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/policies-for-government/bcea-policy-and-procedure-manual/pwd-designation-and-application/designation-application)

Navigating Disability Benefits as an Entrepreneur

Self-employed/entrepreneurs with disabilities faced the dual challenge of growing their businesses while maintaining financial security and access to crucial health support, posing added complexity to navigating disability benefits:

"You have to remember that if you're on PWD, you can only make like fifteen thousand a year. I am on… a self-employment program through the provincial government. What that allows me to do is that allows me to write off my business expenses so that I do not get to that fifteen thousand dollars threshold as fast because then my disability benefits would be cut off, not my medical benefits, but my monetary benefits." (Interviewee 1)

Participants in the entrepreneur focus group voiced uncertainty about how their business incomes could impact their disability benefits, highlighted the lack of clarity in navigating income thresholds compared to traditional forms of employment:

***"When employed by someone else, it's easier to understand how much money one can make without interfering with disability benefits. But as entrepreneurs, it is clear as mud." (Employ to Empower Focus* Group)**

Focus group participants emphasized the crucial role of personalized supports, like Employ to Empower, in assisting entrepreneurs with disabilities as they navigate these challenges. Additionally, interviewees and focus group participants underlined the need for greater streamlining and harmonization between federal and provincial taxation requirements, programs, and disability benefits to better support self-employed individuals and entrepreneurs with disabilities.

Employers highlighted the need for transparent stacking of disability benefits and government funding to accommodate flexible work arrangements preferred by people with disabilities. Eligibility criteria and funding restrictions were seen as hindrances to offering individualized, part-time positions. For example, an employer noted that federal eligibility criteria to fund a summer job prevented them from using the funding to split a full-time position into multiple part-time positions. The employer noted that strict funding criteria prevented them from offering the types of flexible, individualized job roles that were often cited as inclusive practices throughout the interviews and focus groups.

Supports for Entrepreneurs

Interviews explored various enabling factors of inclusive employment, which included publicly funded support available to entrepreneurs and employers. Three out of four interviewees who

were entrepreneurs/self-employed individuals had previous experience with programs that supported them through business coaching or mentoring. These interviewees had positive experiences with business coaching and mentorship support:

> *"[My business mentor] helped me to fly; we have weekly meetings and phone calls to support me… I think you need a mentor and someone to hold you up when you are not so strong; you need that person right beside you." (Interviewee 8)*

Some interviewees expressed frustration with the availability and accessibility of entrepreneurial support programs. While they acknowledged the benefits of such programs, they highlighted the lengthy application process and significant wait times as obstacles. Moreover, some interviewees found that existing supports, such as the Self-Employment Program for disability benefits that allows participants to exempt business-related expenses, to be insufficient. Another interviewee also expressed dissatisfaction that other financial support available was in the form of business loans rather than grants.

The focus group with entrepreneurs echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the need for tailored, accessible support. They called for enhanced entrepreneurial skills development, increased networking opportunities, and additional support for addressing their mental and physical healthcare needs. Participants in both interviews and focus groups shared the view that finding and accessing publicly funded support as an entrepreneur with a disability was a challenging and often inconsistent endeavor. As one participant commented, "you've really got to dig deep" to find and access publicly funded supports.

Supports for Employers

Interviewees presented a spectrum of experiences and opinions regarding the availability and effectiveness of support for employers. While some employers praised provincially funded services like WorkBC for aiding in their recruitment of individuals with disabilities, others criticized these services for "bureaucratic" delays that hindered their staffing efforts. Some described these services as too inflexible to cater to the unique needs of both employers and individuals, leaving them inadequate in providing necessary support.

One employer underscored the challenge of ensuring employees with disabilities received the essential support they required, such as access to a counselor or job coach. They emphasized that accommodation often necessitates ongoing assistance and follow-up, areas where employers commonly lack expertise and resources:

> *"As an employer, we feel like we're on our own… there's no supports… There's no job coaching. There's no onsite [support]. There's been a little bit here and there… Somebody needs to handhold employers or at least feed them the information they*

> *need. Employers are willing to listen. It's just they don't have the resources right now." (Interviewee 11)*

By contrast, most focus group participants spoke positively about their partnerships with service organizations, including WorkBC and credited these supports with addressing the necessary capacity they lacked to pursue more inclusive forms of employment. Where focus group participants noted challenges was with respect to addressing more complex barriers, whether that be with respect to addressing the costs of making buildings accessible or when they have difficulty navigating what publicly funded supports and programs are available to help employees.

This was true of some interviewees who expressed they lacked the expertise to identify and remove barriers and to understand the best ways to work with employees with disabilities. They noted that there was a lack of experts to work with, which could make employers more cautious about trying to be a more disability-inclusive organization. For example, one employer shared an experience where a service organization had made recommendations about workplace adjustments that did not match the employee's preferences or expectations. While the employer was able to address the issues and work with the employee, the employer noted that this lack of expertise was challenging and contributed to a perceived risk employers feel of making mistakes that could impact people with disabilities negatively:

> *"There's a cost. There is an expertise gap. I would say in terms of folks who can actually facilitate those things, so everyone is trying to become their own expert. And then, you know, you do get to that place where if we can't do it well, we don't want to do it because in terms of those more public facing where you don't have a relationship with the person, it's one thing with an employee where you can have an ongoing relationship and say, sorry, my bad. But if you invite someone into the [organization] and really get it wrong, that's not a great experience… Maybe we're not looking in the right places, but there does seem to just be a lack of expertise and just where to go, both on the employment and on the public facing front." (Interviewee 10)*

Addressing Complex Barriers to Employment

Interviewees recognized the lack of publicly available support for employee mental health, and the pandemic's impact on employee wellbeing compelled them to address this, thereby enhancing overall accessibility and inclusivity. They responded by providing additional staff training, enhancing employee benefits, and offering resources for management. They increasingly felt responsible for addressing employees' mental health needs in the workplace:

"Everybody's got some challenges, whether it's suffering from anxiety, that's popped up because of COVID, [or] because of the pandemic depression that may have come into play… that's happened with all of our team members. So having that… understanding has been really key with how to make sure that we've got solutions and that we can make sure that everything's working within our business." (Interviewee 6)

While many interviewees acknowledged their organizations' increased focus on mental health support, they also highlighted the lag in employer capacity. Consequently, employers often felt ill-equipped to promote staff wellbeing, both financially and interpersonally. Middle management sometimes acted as "stand-in social workers," diverting manager resources into addressing employees' mental health challenges. Some rural employers were frustrated by the cost of bringing in experts from urban areas.

Focus group participants noted that their employees faced complex barriers, including physical health issues, poverty, and food insecurity, which often intersect and compound, creating multifaceted challenges:

"There's mental health, there's physical. But then there's also the poverty aspect, and we've got some amazing people that there's so much potential. But trying to overcome this with them when they're taking medication that makes them depressed and it makes them, like, super-hot so they can only work certain times of the year because they just run … into a depression spiral and then they can't work. And then they worry about being able to pay the bills. So, it's just this terrible thing that we see all the time." (Manufacturing Focus Group)

Small business owners in focus groups grappled with the challenge of providing livable wages to their employees, especially in high-cost areas like Metro Vancouver, where they felt it would render their businesses unsustainable. Even with wage subsidies, disparities remained, hindering their ability to meet their employees' financial needs. While these employers recognized the importance of higher wages, they emphasized their inability to shoulder the burden of addressing the cost-of-living crisis:

"I'm looking at the system and I'm going "we honestly need a guaranteed income" because not everybody can make as much money as they need to be able to in order to survive in our economy here… it's unfortunately killing a lot of the small businesses." (Manufacturing Focus Group)

To address these challenges, one social enterprise noted that their model focuses on hiring people with multiple barriers to employment also included an in-house peer employment support worker, offering comprehensive assistance to address complex issues like substance use and mental health. This approach fostered an inclusive and supportive workplace broadly, aligning with their social mission.

Few interviewees were knowledgeable about, or utilized wage subsidies, indicating that they would hire people with disabilities regardless of additional financial support. Addressing vacancies was their primary concern. Interviewees also noted that employee turnover was influenced by a tight labour market, especially in certain sectors like hospitality, where employees could move or change jobs quickly. Given seasonally adjusted staffing needs, some felt that wage subsidies were not practical to accommodate those fluctuating conditions, making them unsuitable.

By contrast, focus group participants had more experience with wage subsidies, but held divergent views on their usefulness, adequacy of funding, and overall effectiveness. While some participants relied on wage subsidies to address the costs of training and to provide more opportunities to employees for individualized approaches, others felt strongly that they don't contribute to long-term retention (i.e., when the subsidy ends, so does employment). Likewise, while some employers highlighted the effectiveness of wage subsidies helping to offset the costs of training roles with more refined skills, others felt that wage subsidies were insufficient to cover the length of time it takes to onboard and train an employee. These employers noted that for certain positions, such as software development, training and onboarding can take months and there is still no guarantee that the employee will onboard successfully. However, if the employee doesn't work out, there was no mechanism to renew the subsidy to try again. Finally, some employers felt that wage subsidies did not adequately cover the costs of employees' mental health supports or provide a living wage, and some noted that wage subsidy eligibility requirements were difficult to navigate.

Some non-profit employers highlighted that government funding is structured in a way that creates a competitive landscape amongst organizations instead of fostering collaboration or pooling of resources to promote inclusion. These employers acknowledged that greater collaboration could contribute to sustainability for inclusive initiatives and longer-term employee wellbeing, which is an ongoing challenge due to the nature of short-term, competitive funding cycles. They noted that the nature of this funding not only has negative consequences for them as employers, but also the vulnerable communities that they serve:

> *"… What happens when these contracts are cancelled, or your organization doesn't win those[?]… The members of that population still come to your organization and they're looking for a certain staff member that they've had a connection with, and they may be gone. And so, it impacts the community and the population tremendously when the funding is competitive and unreliable, not long-term thinking." (Vantage Point Focus Group)*

Labour Market

In a competitive labor market, inclusive hiring practices emerged as a necessity for attracting and retaining talent. Employers recognized the value of tapping into diverse talent pools through inclusive employment conditions, viewing people with disabilities as a valuable, "untapped" resource. Furthermore, they observed improved retention rates among individuals with disabilities, noting their reputation for reliability and loyalty to their roles:

> *"With other employers, other small businesses, talking about it [I'd] say: 'Hey, are you looking for staff? Because there's a huge part of society that is available. And if you're willing to put in some extra time and some extra effort here and there, they'll be super loyal. They'll do the job really well and it'll make your life easier." (Interviewee 6)*

Similarly, one interviewee with lived experience with disability suggested that they were intentional about hiring people with disabilities because such employees were perceived to be more committed to their jobs, paid more attention to detail, and were more loyal to the employer.

Echoing this sentiment, focus group participants agreed that inclusive hiring practices were essential to address labor shortages, recognizing people with disabilities as an untapped talent pool. They emphasized that embracing DEI wasn't just a moral imperative but also a sound economic decision for long-term success:

> *"… There's good employees out there that have been kind of an untapped resource that I think, you know, the community is starting to be a little bit more willing to spend that extra time to get a really good long term financial benefit. It just makes good business sense, right? People that are living in town don't have to look for this to live. Perhaps, you know, they just need a few things, you know?" (Terrace Focus Group)*

SUCCESS FACTORS

Employers emphasized that open-mindedness, empathy, and flexibility are key to fostering inclusive workplaces. They also expressed the need for guidance, support, and resource-sharing among peers. Employers want to learn directly from one another with practical examples on the benefits of disability inclusion.

Success Factors and Transferrable Approaches

Interviewees were asked to reflect on transferable approaches, key success factors, and advice they could share with other employers at the beginning of their journey to be inclusive. Many interviewees highlighted factors related to an open mindset and leaving any preconceived biases and judgements with respect to disability behind. Likewise, interviewees with lived experience emphasized that approaching accessibility and inclusion with compassion and empathy was the most important quality that an employer could have:

> *"I think this [person-first approach] is transferable to all organizations across the globe because we're talking about the golden rule. Treat people the way you wish to be treated period, right? … I feel like more and more employers need to stop virtue signaling what they think is the right thing to say… because we are in a time where people are so afraid to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing because they don't want to be canceled. I say you're 'cancel-proof' if you're a good person and you just approach people with compassion and empathy. Right? There's nothing that can be canceled when you admit your faults and you understand that you're not perfect in all aspects, but that you're willing and open to learn… They're just forgetting the fact that it's not about playing up to people's sensitivities. It's about playing up to their strengths." (Interviewee 4)*

Interviewees with lived experience emphasized the importance of engaging in open conversations with employees about their individual strengths, needs, and preferences. They stressed that disability experiences vary widely, and what works in one context may not in another. Rather than relying only on self-disclosure, they advocated for proactive removal of barriers for all employees, with options to tailor the work environment to individual strengths.

Focus group participants echoed the importance of bringing flexibility, open-mindedness, and embracing new ways of working that foster disability inclusion. They underscored the importance of bringing different perspectives and being able to see things differently:

> *"… I really appreciate [the partnership] because it [helped] myself… think about it in a different way and to think about who's using our space, how is it being used? How can we make this work? And I really appreciate when I go to the staff and say, 'this is what's going on, this is the needs of the person. This is what they're interested in doing. What can we what can we do?' Everybody is very supportive about saying, 'Well, I think this could work or we could make that work.' And so, I really appreciate that aspect of… [helping] the staff see things in a different way and see how we can do things differently and that flexibility, and so I appreciate that too." (Terrace Focus Group)*

In addition to personal traits like open-mindedness and curiosity, interviewees and focus group participants highlighted the value of guidance, support, and resource sharing with other employers. They emphasized the importance of participating in learning events and networks where employers could collaborate and share experiences, preventing redundant efforts. These employers were eager to share their insights and resources to educate others about the benefits of disability inclusion:

> *"I'll basically tell any [employer] and I've done this for years… 'Here's our model, here's our resources. Here's everything we developed. You can have it and then just put your logo'… I'm all about sharing resources because I really want to educate other parties around how they can make changes as well." (Interviewee 9)*

Several employers also commented that they need more concrete examples of employers who do this well, acknowledging that they were still on a journey to become more inclusive. As such, the case studies that will further explore enabling conditions and structures for disability-inclusive employment and how employers respond to barriers that exist beyond their walls, will serve as important examples in terms of their successes, innovations, and how they address or overcome challenges.

Summary of Learning

This summary of learning from interviews and focus groups with employers and entrepreneurs across British Columbia has contributed an understanding of employers' approaches to disability inclusion at work, how their approaches are nested within personal lived experiences, as well as larger social, political, and economic contexts.

From the pivotal role of individual factors in shaping attitudes toward disability inclusion to the significance of open dialogue, flexibility, and transparency in fostering the full participation of individuals with disabilities, employers illuminated how such "everyday" actions can meaningfully contribute to inclusive employment.

Employers of varying sizes, sectors, and organizational structures embraced practices that proactively identified and removed barriers, focused on individual strengths, and championed flexibility. They underscored the value of forging partnerships with service organizations to establish and sustain effective inclusion practices, while also highlighting how public policies and funding influence their capacity to innovate, collaborate, and promote inclusion within their organizations. The economic return of inclusion was a recurring theme, with participants stressing the importance of investing in inclusive practices as a wise long-term decision.

Employers and entrepreneurs with disabilities emphasized the urgent need for improved coordination, clarity, and access to publicly funded supports and services. They navigated complex barriers to employment and the systems designed to address them. Employers sometimes felt challenged balancing immediate pressures with long-term solutions to ensure the flourishing of their employees, organizations, and communities. Lastly, interviewees and focus group participants expressed eagerness to learn from one another and emphasized the importance of diverse examples and stories directly from disability-inclusive employers.

APPENDIX A: DIMENSIONS OF INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT

SRDC conducted a targeted review of the evidence on inclusive employment to identify a variety of dimensions known to contribute to better outcomes for people with disabilities. These dimensions are reflected in the sub-research questions proposed for primary data collection.

Table 1 Methods to access and retrieve materials

Method	Description
Search for academic literature	▪ Use of Google Scholar, EBSCO, ProQuest, and Scholars Portal to identify areas, factors, and frameworks for understanding inclusive employment for people with disabilities and those experiencing other barriers to employment. ▪ Search terms consisted of combinations related to the specific population (people with disabilities), jurisdictions (results limited to Canada and the US), and employment. Results were limited to publication year of no earlier than 2010.
Targeted scan of grey literature and employer tools/guides	▪ Review of inclusive workplace practices and guides from Canadian organizations (Inclusion Canada, CASDA, ODEN, President's Group, CASE, Conference Board of Canada, Parkinson Canada, Ready Willing & Able, and Restigouche CBDC) ▪ Review of inclusive employment frameworks from international sources (Gartner Inclusion Index, Handicap International 5 Dimensions of an Inclusive Company, Disability:IN Disability Equality Index, UK Disability Confident Employer (Level 2), National Organization on Disability Employment Tracker).

In total 30 resources were reviewed and coded in NVivo, which identified seven dimensions of inclusive employment. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, and the sources we reviewed emphasized the mutually reinforcing nature of these dimensions. However, they help to establish an evidence-based framework to further investigate the unique experiences of B.C. employers.

Table 2 Dimensions of inclusive employment

Dimension	Description	Sub-Research Question
1. Leadership & Management Approaches	▪ Includes leadership commitment, but also recognizes specific leadership characteristics (i.e., humility), role of senior management and direct supervisors in contributing to inclusive workplaces, the importance of representation in senior ranks, mentorship, and modelling inclusion.	▪ What are the characteristics of inclusive leaders/management of B.C. employers/entrepreneurs and what facilitates this type of leadership?
2. Employment & HR Practices	▪ A broad category encompassing organizational policies and procedures with respect to non-discrimination and accommodations, but also practices with respect to recruitment, hiring, retention, promotion, training, job flexibility, attendance, performance management, and occupational health. This category also includes considerations with respect to compensation, benefits, return to work, and emergency policies and procedures.	▪ What specific employment and HR practices have contributed to creating an inclusive workplace? What practices were easy for employers/entrepreneurs to operationalize and what practices were more challenging and why?
3. Physical Accessibility (Including Technology)	▪ Identification and elimination of physical barriers in the workplace as well as access to assistive technology or approaches to inclusive or universal design to ensure accessible environments for all staff.	▪ How have employers/entrepreneurs addressed issues accessibility in their work environments and in technology used in the workplace? What broader conditions have supported them in this process?
4. Decision-Making and Communication	▪ Includes specific governance features (e.g., inclusion of stakeholders in governance), mechanisms for employee engagement/employee voice, Employee Resource Groups for people with disabilities, and communications styles that focus on accessibility/plain language, consensus, and transparency/regularity of communication on inclusion efforts, successes, and challenges.	▪ What decision-making and communications strategies can employers/entrepreneurs identify that contribute to workplace inclusion? What contributes to their effectiveness?

Dimension	Description	Sub-Research Question
5. Partnerships	▪ Intentional partnerships with community and organizations serving people with disabilities, as well as strategies for public-private-partnerships, emphasis on supplier/partner diversity, and procurement.	▪ What role do partnerships with other businesses, organizations, and within the community play in creating inclusive employment?
6. Measurement & Accountability	▪ Emphasis on setting goals and measurement strategies for workplace inclusion, a focus on continuous improvement and positioning inclusion as a journey as opposed to a time-limited initiative.	▪ How is progress defined and measured? What influences the ways in which employers/entrepreneurs articulate accountability to employees and to the public?
7. Culture & Values	▪ Various characteristics identified include celebration of difference, emphasis on learning/growth, flexibility and collaboration, authenticity and brining the "whole self" to work, and incorporating inclusion into employer mission, vision, and values.	▪ How do employers/entrepreneurs understand inclusive employment within the context of the organization's mission, vision, and values? ▪ How do employers and entrepreneurs foster a culture of inclusion through specific behaviours, mindsets, or other practices? How do broader societal values and beliefs influence these? For employers who are guided by a stated social mission with regards to their business and employment practices, to what extent are these social values reflected in their inclusive employment practices?

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