

# **ENVIRONICS**

RESEARCH

## **2020 Validation of Key Findings from the 2019 Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat Benchmarking Study of Workplace Accommodations in the Federal Public Service**

### **Final Report**

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## Executive summary

The 2018–19 report on employment equity in the public service of Canada<sup>1</sup> found that people with disabilities represent 5% of the core federal public service, despite forming 9% of the available workforce and 22% of the Canadian population aged 15 and older.

Recognizing the need to address this gap, and considering feedback collected from federal public servants with disabilities through the annual Public Service Employee Survey and various consultations conducted by the Office of Public Service Accessibility in 2018 and early 2019, the 2019 Benchmarking Study of Workplace Accommodations in the federal public service<sup>2</sup> (“Benchmarking Study”) was conducted by the Office

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/employment-equity-annual-reports/employment-equity-public-service-canada-2018-2019.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/accessibility-public-service/benchmarking-study-workplace-accommodations.html>

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of Public Service Accessibility in the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat. The goal was to:

- produce baseline data about employees' and supervisors' experiences in navigating the existing federal workplace accommodation process; and,
- identify key findings, issues and opportunities for further exploration in order to improve accommodation practices and reduce systemic barriers that contribute to the need for individual accommodations.

The findings from the Benchmarking Study identified themes and patterns among the experiences reported by employees who had made an accommodation request and supervisors who had made such requests on behalf of an employee. These themes are consistent with those that have emerged in publicly available reports from other surveys and studies conducted both within and outside of the federal public service, and in anecdotal evidence provided to the Office of Public Service Accessibility. This literature review examines research conducted in different contexts to provide the Office of Public Service Accessibility with an analysis of the available comparable and/or supporting data sources that may be used to validate and strengthen the findings of the Benchmarking Study.

## Findings

The literature suggests that the specific organizational orientation toward workplace accommodations plays an important role in the experience of employees that require accommodations. Organizations can be more open and proactive, or they can be more closed and reactive, and this orientation can influence how early (and even if) employees come forward to make an accommodation request, as fear of the perceptions of supervisors and co-workers are a major concern. However, the research suggests that co-worker reactions are more often positive than negative and an orientation that is positive toward accommodating employees with disabilities helps to reduce stigma and increase morale organization-wide.

Supervisors play a major role as the “gatekeeper” to the accommodation process and a common finding in both the Benchmarking Study and the literature is that more and/or better training for supervisors about accommodations should be provided. Supervisors are often inexperienced with accommodations and lack specific training around disability awareness (especially in the case of mental health) and about the long-term benefits of accommodation relative to cost, such as increased productivity and effectiveness achieved as a result of appropriate accommodation-related investments.

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Training on how to handle disability and accommodations in the most effective and supportive way is seen as an important way to improve outcomes for all involved.

The Benchmarking Study demonstrated that gaps in perceptions exist between employees and their supervisors/employers about the success of accommodations in reducing workplace barriers, indicating a difference in the understanding about how successful the process has been and the extent to which accommodations resolve barriers faced by employees with disabilities. The literature provides confirming evidence that gaps such as these are commonly observed in other workplaces, pointing to a more systemic difference in how supervisors and employees view accommodations.

Another observation from the Benchmarking Study which was validated within the literature was a lack of transparency about the rationale when an accommodation request is denied. This points to structural or organizational issues with communication around accommodation requests.

The literature confirms – across workplace types and countries – the existence of barriers to the career prospects of people with disabilities, including barriers to gaining employment and to advancing their career, higher levels of discrimination and harassment, and accordingly, lower levels of workplace engagement. The Benchmarking Study similarly

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showed that these barriers exist for many employees with disabilities who have requested accommodations in the public service of the Government of Canada. However, both the literature review and the Benchmarking Study also reveal that receiving an accommodation leads to higher levels of job satisfaction and increases the likelihood of a more inclusive workplace.

The Benchmarking Study suggested that most accommodation requests are approved, which is consistent with the broader literature covering other workplaces. The literature also shows that when accommodations are provided to employees, they are usually positively received by both employees and their supervisors in terms of satisfaction and effectiveness. There remains, however, residual unmet need (when accommodations are denied, not properly implemented or do not address the barrier that is affecting an employee's ability to perform their job effectively), and, as observed in the Benchmarking Study, the literature confirms that employees who are not properly accommodated may leave their positions, retire early or be forced to go on extended sick leave.

The Benchmarking Study highlighted procedural issues which the literature confirms are common to the accommodations process in other workplaces. The primary issue for both employees and supervisors is long waits and delays for receiving accommodations, leading to physical, emotional and



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financial difficulties for employees. A common recommendation in the literature is to implement timing guidelines, service standards or statutory time limits for when accommodations must be provided. Evidence from a landmark case study demonstrates that accommodation processes that involve functional experts more directly (for example, experts in facilities, information technology, ergonomics), that clarify the roles that supervisors should play in the process, and that minimize the involvement of HR were successful, echoing suggestions from the Benchmarking Study.

A key theme of the Benchmarking Study was the central role played by direct supervisors in the success and outcome of the accommodations process along with the observation that their levels of experience, training and support can vary, leading to inconsistent and, in some cases, negative outcomes.

Supervisors also describe a lack of support from functional experts and the amount of work required of them in handling accommodation requests. The literature validates these concerns and speaks of a “line manager lottery” where outcomes for workers with disabilities can depend heavily on the support and attitude of their direct supervisor. The literature suggests the benefits of a more centralized approach to managing accommodations include limiting the potentially negative effects that an individual supervisor could have on an employee’s accommodation request, providing for more input

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by trained experts, streamlining the process and costs savings. There is gap in the existing literature about the specific role of Labour Relations, which was found in the Benchmarking Study to be of concern to employees who feel it is not impartial because it tends to represent the needs of management. Notwithstanding this gap, the evidence supports the need for a neutral resource to facilitate an end-to-end accommodation process by providing support for, and acting as a liaison between, employees, supervisors and functional experts.

Finally, there is a gap in the existing literature about the role that medical evidence does, or should, play in the accommodations process. The Benchmarking Study revealed perceptions among employees and supervisors that employees are required to provide more evidence than is necessary, which can actually lengthen or otherwise hinder the process. There is limited discussion in the broader literature about this issue, aside from a few instances where workplaces are described as adhering to the “medical model” of disability and an “approval by default” approach is recommended instead.

## Background and objectives

The Office of Public Service Accessibility was created in 2018 to assist departments in preparing for new accessibility requirements under the Accessible Canada Act, which received Royal Assent in June 2019, and to develop an Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada<sup>3</sup> to improve accessibility government-wide. The Office of Public Service Accessibility mandate also includes the creation and management of a Centralized Enabling Workplace Fund (“the Fund”). The Fund is used to sponsor and invest in projects and initiatives to increase accessibility in the federal public service by improving workplace accommodation practices and reducing or eliminating systemic barriers that contribute to the need for individual accommodation.

The employment statistics for people with disabilities point to the need for these efforts. According to the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability, 22% of Canadians aged 15 and older have at least one disability. However, people with disabilities

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/accessibility-public-service/accessibility-strategy-public-service-toc.html>

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represent only 9% of the Canadian population available for employment in the federal public service, based on workforce availability estimates in the 2018–19 report on employment equity in the public service of Canada<sup>4</sup>. This gap, which is not adequately explained by the number of people still in school and/or not yet in the workforce, appears to indicate that people with disabilities are unemployed (or underemployed) in general. Moreover, people with disabilities represent only 5.2% of the 2018–19 core public service (per the employment equity report), indicating that the federal public service is underperforming in its employment of people with disabilities relative to their workforce availability.

Recognizing the need to address this gap, and considering feedback collected from federal public servants with disabilities through the annual Public Service Employee Survey and various consultations conducted by the Office of Public Service Accessibility in 2018 and early 2019, a Benchmarking Study of

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/employment-equity-annual-reports/employment-equity-public-service-canada-2018-2019.html>

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Workplace Accommodations in the federal public service<sup>5</sup> (referred to as the “Benchmarking Study” throughout) was conducted in 2019. The goal was to:

- produce baseline data related to employees’ and supervisors’ experiences in navigating the existing federal workplace accommodation process; and,
- identify key findings, issues and opportunities for further exploration in order to improve accommodation practices.

The Study consisted of two government-wide online surveys. Phase 1 quantified experiences in the previous three years among federal public service employees who made an accommodation request and federal public service supervisors who made such requests on behalf of an employee; a total of 5,245 surveys were completed for Phase 1, representing 3,413 employee surveys and 1,832 supervisor surveys. Subsequently, Phase 2 explored the Phase 1 findings in greater depth; a total of 980 respondents from the Phase 1 survey, representing 802 employees and 178 supervisors,

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/accessibility-public-service/benchmarking-study-workplace-accommodations.html>

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completed a series of mainly qualitative (open-ended) questions about their experiences.

The Benchmarking Study identified themes and patterns that align with evidence gathered by the Office of Public Service Accessibility through other channels, for example through two online surveys conducted in developing the Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada and anecdotally through town halls and other consultations. However, since the Benchmarking Study involved an opt-in methodology rather than a random sample, its findings cannot be considered representative of the workplace accommodation experiences of all federal public servants.

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## **Objective**

A literature review was therefore undertaken to substantiate the findings of the Benchmarking Study. The objective is to provide the Office of Public Service Accessibility with an analysis of comparable data sources that support or contradict the results of the Benchmarking Study. This will provide senior management with further evidence to inform and guide investments to be made from the Centralized Enabling Workplace Fund.

## **Focus of the literature review**

### **Target audience**

While the Benchmarking Study was conducted exclusively with workers in the Canadian federal public service, this review includes research and datasets from public service employees in other jurisdictions, workers from other sectors and industries, and research involving members of the public (who may or may not be employed). It also includes research among people with and without disabilities and with people who have specific types of disability status that may not be directly comparable to the Benchmarking Study findings. In these cases, it is made clear what differences exist from the Benchmarking Study.

## Disability versus accommodation

Much of the literature surrounding workplace accommodation is located within the larger topic of disability in the workplace. The review focuses as specifically as possible on accommodations (and the processes used to manage them) without exploring disability in the workplace writ large, but there is not always a clear demarcation between the two. The results of the Benchmarking Study also include some findings about topics that more generally fall into the category of “disability in the workplace.”

For example, the “employment gap,” where those who identify as having a disability are less likely than those without a disability to be employed, is well established and consistently observed across industrialized countries where data is available (for example, data from the Canadian Survey on Disability from Statistics Canada). The literature that explores the reasons for this employment gap and what could be done to address it provides some insight into the topic of workplace accommodations, since challenges facing people who request accommodations overlap with those experienced by the broader population of people with disabilities.



## **Literature landscape**

The search for sources of comparable research and datasets began with suggestions provided by the Treasury Board Secretariat and was then expanded to include sources referenced in that literature. An expansive Internet search was also conducted for publicly available information about surveys of public sector employees, workers in general population and those with disabilities.

## **Studies involving feedback from public service employees or supervisors**

Several of the studies included in this review involve large studies with public sector (or mostly public sector) employees. These studies involve feedback from employees whose workplaces most closely match that of the TBS Benchmarking Study and includes quantitative survey research as well as qualitative research (focus groups and in-depth interviews). These studies focus on disability and the workplace and include information about accommodations in the workplace (even if it is not the primary focus). These studies include the Public Service Employee Survey of Government of Canada employees; a large quantitative and qualitative study by the University of Canberra of employees from seven different government departments in Australia; a study of members of

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UNISON, the largest public sector union in the United Kingdom; and, research by Wales Trades Union Congress, the coordinating body of trade unions in Wales.

### **Studies of the population of people with disabilities or analysis of survey-based data**

These studies provide information about the larger population of people with disabilities (or with specific types of disability) outside of public service employees. These studies are primarily concerned with larger topics of disability and working but also include questions specifically about workplace accommodation. The Canadian Survey on Disability is the most relevant such source examined in this review.

### **Journal articles involving analysis of existing data**

Studies that use existing datasets such as the Canadian Survey on Disability or the United States Health and Retirement Study were used to run analysis and provide additional insight about subgroups of the population covered. Most of these analyses focus on a specific aspect of disability in the workplace or accommodation in particular. Most of those included in this review come from large, existing datasets but also include primary research that is small-scale and non-representative.

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## Considerations

Most of the research reviewed does not line up directly with the Benchmarking Study in terms of either the target audience from which data is gathered or the precise questions being asked. Instead, the overall themes emerging from the Benchmarking Study are examined and references to the literature that tend to support or contradict them are presented below. As a result, much of the evidence uses comparisons between the broad findings of the sources instead of comparing specific results. This notwithstanding, the consistency of the findings and conclusions about the role of accommodations for employees in the workplace from a range of sources, is notable. Thus, we believe this literature review is an appropriate foundation for placing the findings of the Treasury Board Secretariat Benchmarking Study into context within the larger research environment.

One other consideration is that the research sources differ in terms of either accommodation type or type of disability or health condition that led to an accommodation. For example, the Lloyds case study reflects a more homogenous set of conditions and disabilities underlying accommodation requests than did the Benchmarking Study. Moreover, accommodations due to a mental health condition were much less prominent in the Lloyds data (2%) than in the Benchmarking Study (19%). In general, differences based on health condition or disability and

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accommodation type in the Benchmarking Survey were not large or consistent; for this reason, such differences were not considered sufficient reason to discount these sources.

This review includes research from Canada and the United States, as well as from other jurisdictions such as Australia and the United Kingdom where workplace accommodations are referred to as “workplace adjustments.” These countries share broad similarities in terms of the legal duty to accommodate. The term “adjustment” is used in this report when directly quoting a source; otherwise, the term “accommodation” is used.

## **Detailed literature review findings by theme**

### **A. Workplace orientation toward accommodations**

#### **1. An accepting and proactive approach to accommodations**

There is widespread evidence of fears about stigma associated with workplace accommodation requests that can hold back people from making them. The literature suggests that an open and proactive approach to providing accommodations has positive outcomes on employee interactions and morale, and that proactive universal design and greater openness to various types of accommodation for all employees (that is, not just disability-related accommodation), in particular, can reduce stigma.

Employees who consider requesting an accommodation do so within a specific organizational orientation toward disability and accommodation that can be more open and proactive or more closed and reactive. Fears about stigma and reputational damage are noted throughout the literature, but when accommodations are made available, co-worker reactions are often positive and can help improve workplace morale.

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## Benchmarking Study result

Phase 2 of the Benchmarking Study revealed substantial concerns about stigma associated with requesting accommodations. Respondents consistently described their emotions in the period prior to submitting their accommodation request as negative. They described worries about negative perceptions among their peers, fear of damaging their relationship with their supervisor (and resulting damage to their career prospects) and concerns about their privacy and confidentiality. A substantial proportion (43%) said that, at some point in the past, they chose **not** to request an accommodation that would have improved their ability to carry out their job-related duties. In addition, experiences with harassment and discrimination are more widely reported by those making an accommodation request than by employees with a disability as a whole (the latter based on respondents to the 2019 Public Service Employee Survey, most of whom have not made an accommodation request); further research is required to support a causal link.

## Findings from the literature

Other research has shown that hesitation to request accommodations is linked to stigma and concerns about how their request will be received. The 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability, which was conducted among people with a disability

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who are working, found the most common reasons for choosing **not** to ask for an accommodation are discomfort about asking (42%) and a fear of negative outcomes (34%). Similarly, a 2018 survey of Ontario public service employees found that those who did not make a request cited concerns around stigma, impact on their career progression, concern about privacy or confidentiality and uncertainty about the outcome. A study by the Business Disability Forum in the United Kingdom (2019) identified concerns over employer perceptions and the reactions of colleagues as some of the key reasons for not requesting additional or new accommodations.

The research also shows employers worry that co-workers will react negatively to workers with disabilities who receive accommodations. A study by Bonaccio et al. (2019) describes the perception among some supervisors that “employees without disabilities will resent accommodations that are provided to those who need them.” (page 149) These include worries that co-workers without disabilities will perceive accommodations as unjust or feel that work is being unfairly redistributed following accommodations. Similar observations were made by some supervisors within open-ended responses in the Benchmarking Study.

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Beyond perceptions, some research has confirmed negative workplace experiences for those requesting accommodations. Research with workers who received accommodation at a German industrial workplace (Kensbock et al., 2017) found that around half of participants described some kind of negative interpersonal experience (including some who reported bullying or maltreatment). A large study of private-sector United States companies (Cornell, 2014) found that a small group (10–15%) reported that their co-workers were resentful of the accommodations they had received. However, the researchers concluded that, in fact, most co-workers had positive reactions to accommodations, according to all of the groups involved. When making an accommodation request, a majority in each group (61% of employees with disabilities, 69% of co-workers, and 68% of supervisors) reported that none of their co-workers were negative or resentful, and most or all employees were positive and supportive.

In fact, the literature shows that providing workplace accommodations generally has positive outcomes. Bonaccio et al. (2019) conclude that positive co-worker reactions to accommodations are more common than negative ones (although negative reactions still exist). Moreover, supervisors report that providing accommodations improved interactions between employees with disabilities and their co-workers while increasing overall company morale:



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Rather than negatively affecting workplace morale, there is evidence that employees with disabilities will have a positive effect on the organizational attitudes of their co-workers. (...) Accommodations send important and positive signals to employees by showing that the organization values the contributions of its employees and cares about their well-being. Signaling organizational support is not trivial, inasmuch as these perceptions lead to positive work experiences, such as affective commitment. (page 149)

Some researchers argue that a more accepting workplace orientation toward providing accommodations to employees, regardless of disability status, can help reduce stigma. Tompa et al. (2015) concluded in their review of the available evidence around workplace accommodations that:

Not only can universal accommodation be beneficial for all employees, but it can also decrease the feelings of stigma that employees with disabilities may experience when requesting or utilizing a workplace accommodation (page 21)

Indeed, the overarching conclusion of the Cornell research is that since many employees without disabilities also receive accommodations, disability accommodations should be framed in the context of accommodations for **all** employees:

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Consistent with other studies, our findings suggest the importance of understanding workplace culture as a facilitator of successful accommodations. (...) Disability accommodations need to be viewed in the context of accommodations for the personal needs of all employees, and that accommodations may not only maximize the inclusion of people with disabilities but may have positive spillovers on other employees that foster overall workplace productivity. (pages 29–30)

Thus, a positive orientation toward accommodations has positive effects both among co-workers of those who receive them and at the organizational level, while reducing stigma for those with a disability. This observation mirrors anecdotal evidence about the positive outcomes reported by many organizations that proactively provided accommodation and support to all employees, including, but not limited to, those with disabilities during the sudden, rapid transition to remote work for a large proportion of their workforce in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Finally, a more open and proactive orientation can overcome differences in outcome based on employee personality traits. A paper using data from the United States Health and Retirement Study (Hill et al., 2016) focused on employees with newly identified disabilities in their fifties and identified the variables (either employee or employer-related) that increase the

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likelihood that an employee will request and receive an accommodation. They found that employee characteristics – most notably personality traits (for example, agreeableness and neuroticism are both strongly negatively correlated with receiving accommodation and extraversion is positively correlated with accommodation) – “largely determine which workers are accommodated following disability onset, suggesting that employees, rather than employers, bear the burden of communicating and asserting their needs.” (page 15) They conclude that, to ensure that workers whose personality makes them less likely to request an accommodation do not end up with unmet needs, organizations should actively ask their employees about accommodations and not rely on them to educate themselves about their rights and to voluntarily come forward with a request.

### **2. Training for supervisors**

Supervisors are often inexperienced and lack training around accommodations. The literature consistently suggests that disability awareness training, training around specific disabilities such as mental health, and evidence for the long-term benefits of accommodation relative to cost (such as increased productivity and effectiveness as a result of appropriate accommodation-related investments) would result in better outcomes.

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In many workplaces, both within the Canadian public service and outside of it, an employee's direct manager or supervisor handles the accommodation request. If supervisors lack the training necessary to handle disability and accommodations in the most effective or supportive way (and most are not subject matter experts and may have little experience with the issues and processes involved), it could negatively impact the accommodation request process and outcomes.

### **Benchmarking Study result**

Phase 1 of the Benchmarking Study found that almost two thirds of participating supervisors handled fewer than one accommodation request per year on average. It is difficult to estimate how representative this finding is among all Government of Canada supervisors. The actual number of accommodation requests per supervisor is likely even lower since the study excluded supervisors who had not handled any accommodation requests in the previous three years.

Phase 2 highlighted that some supervisors are challenged by having conversations with employees about workplace accommodations and by the complexity of the process, both of which are compounded by insufficient training and support. Some employees also raised concerns about their supervisor's level of experience and knowledge and said that problems at

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the early stages could have been avoided if their supervisor had been more familiar with the accommodation process.

A common suggestion from the Benchmarking Study is for supervisors to be more understanding about accommodation requests to combat employees' feeling that their request is nothing but a burden. Some even say that their supervisor's lack of appreciation for their need for accommodation went beyond a lack of support and that their supervisor was actively attempting to impede or deny the request. When asked what could have been done to improve the decision phase of the process, a common response was to provide better training for supervisors about the duty to accommodate, the accommodation process and sensitivity to the issues.

Finally, supervisors responding to the Benchmarking Study identify funding for accommodations as a challenge for implementing approved accommodations, with a number questioning how they would pay for the accommodation, and their unpredictable nature from year to year. In instances where the cost of providing accommodation comes from team budgets, some supervisors describe the effect of providing them as a concern.

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## Findings from the literature

Secondary literature provides strong validation for the finding from the Benchmarking Study that supervisors/employers need more training around disability in general, and accommodations in particular, with a lack of experience, awareness and knowledge being commonly described.

A large study of accommodation requests among eight large United States companies (Schur et al., 2014) noted that among supervisors, 40% report they have supervised employees with a disability, and half of these (49%) had at least one employee with a disability who had requested an accommodation. This means that only around 20% of these supervisors have experience with accommodations for employees with disabilities.

In the Canberra study of Australian Public Servants, a key issue that emerged from focus groups was “the need to increase disability awareness and understanding in the workforce generally, and for supervisors specifically. Mental Health was identified as one area in particular, where more educational work needed to be implemented. Supervisors themselves often recognized this gap in their skill-set.”

(Canberra, page 15) Disability awareness training was seen as critical and education for all staff was seen as paramount to enabling cultural change and should be mandatory.

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Research by Action on Hearing Loss in the United Kingdom showed that among those with hearing loss, the most common reason for not getting support at work is that employees feel employers or colleagues do not have the knowledge to help (57%). A different 2017 Action on Hearing Loss survey of **employers** also provides similar evidence: two fifths (39%) said they do not feel well-equipped to enable staff with hearing loss to stay productive in the workforce.

In research focusing primarily on labour participation in the workforce (Bonaccio, 2020; research by the Job Accommodation Network, 2019, page 146), supervisors often acknowledge lacking the necessary training at all stages of the employment relationship, and especially when it comes to accommodation processes. Training would “permit the focus to shift from legal compliance, to a focus on helping everyone learn to think more creatively and constructively about accommodations, and to see the many benefits of accommodations and inclusive workplace practices.” (page 148)

Finally, the need for additional clarity and training for supervisors on the cost-effectiveness of accommodations is clearly indicated by the research. A number of different research sources point out the cost effectiveness of accommodations (Bonaccio, 2020; Job Accommodation Network research, 2005 and 2019). The Cornell research

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indicated that most disability accommodations have zero or small monetary costs, regardless of whether employees or supervisors were asked. Accommodations are shown to reduce waste due to absenteeism, increase productivity, reduce insurance costs and compare very favourably to the cost of hiring and training replacement employees (Bonaccio, 2020; Job Accommodation Network research 2005 and 2019). As direct supervisors are often required to pay for accommodations using funds for their team, they may be more likely to focus on up-front costs instead of the longer-term benefits that accommodations provide at an organizational level (a centralized fund would also help with this problem as described in section C2, below).

### **3. Perception gaps between employees and supervisors**

Gaps in perceptions exist between employees and their supervisors and employers about the success of accommodations in reducing workplace barriers.

With some aspects of the accommodation process, there is a disconnect between how supervisors and employees view the success of an accommodation in overcoming barriers in the workplace. For example, supervisors provide higher (more positive) estimates of the proportion of accommodations that were accepted and successfully implemented than is reported



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by the employees requesting the accommodations. This issue is important as it points to a difference in understanding between the two groups about how successful the process has been and the extent to which providing an accommodation can resolve the barriers faced by employees with disabilities.

### **Benchmarking Study result**

Phase 1 of the Benchmarking Study provided evidence of such perception gaps between employees and supervisors. For instance, there is a gap between what a supervisor knows about the accommodation process and what an employee perceives (for example, reasons for delayed decisions or implementation), as well as between what an employee knows and what a supervisor perceives (for example, reasons for requesting an accommodation). Gaps also exist in terms of the proportion of employees who say their request was approved (83% compared to 95% of supervisors handling such requests) and whether the accommodation is in place and working properly (45% of employees versus 62% of supervisors).

### **Findings from the literature**

While only some of the sources examined here involve input from both supervisors and employees (and measures directly comparable to the Benchmarking Study are not readily available), evidence of a similar gap in perceptions is noted in a number of places within the literature. In cases where they

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are available, data from supervisors and employees were not directly linked (that is, they were not providing feedback about the exact same case) and so are similar to the Benchmarking Study in that respect.

Research using the Job Accommodation Network survey database of employees and employers who have used Job Accommodation Network services for accommodation consultation in the US (Hendricks, 2005) identified differences of this type. This research shows that employers are more likely to believe the process works and are more confident that accommodations address employee concerns. Specifically, employers were less likely (61% versus 73%) to report that barriers affecting the employees' disability substantially limited the kind or amount of work they could do (and reported the severity of the effect of the barrier as lower on a 5-point scale than did employees themselves). After accommodation, employers were more apt than employees to report the accommodation reduced the effect of the barrier and therefore to believe the accommodation successfully addressed the barrier.

The Job Accommodation Network research also found that employers were more likely to report that the accommodation was approved and implemented than did employees. The research by Cornell also involved input from both groups and found supervisors were more likely to say that the request was

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fully granted (91% versus 73% of employees with disabilities and 79% of employees without disabilities). In addition, the Cornell study found differing reasons given for rejection: supervisors were more likely to say the requested accommodation was “not appropriate for the job or task” (52% versus 13% of employees).

### **4. Lack of explanation for rejected requests**

For employees who have had their accommodation request denied, there is commonly a lack of transparency about the rationale for the decision.

In cases where accommodations requests are rejected, there is often a lack of understanding among employees about the reasoning behind the denial. A lack of transparency and communication around denied accommodation requests may contribute to the perception that a workplace is not open to accommodations.

### **Benchmarking Study result**

The second phase of the Benchmarking Study specifically noted that when requests involving a health condition or disability are denied, employees do not feel a sufficient explanation was provided. Only one in five employees (19%) whose request was denied say they received enough information to explain why their request was denied.

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## Findings from the literature

This finding is observed consistently across studies in other jurisdictions. The Ontario public service employee study asked employees who did not receive a required accommodation why the accommodation was not granted. The most common single response was that no reason was provided (38%) (Ontario public service report, 2018). The Cornell research among US businesses similarly found that the most common reason given by employees for the rejection of an accommodation request was “don’t know” (26%) (page 19). Finally, research with union members who have a disability in the UK found that, while cost and impact on individual performance were mentioned as reasons why they were not granted an accommodation, the next most common response was that “no reason” was given (UNISON, 2019, page 7).

## **B. Retention, Promotion and Productivity**

### **1. The role of accommodations in employee engagement**

Employees with disabilities are more likely to report difficulties in their career (including instances of discrimination and harassment) and less likely to be engaged in the workplace. In turn, receiving an accommodation is linked to higher engagement and job satisfaction.

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Throughout the literature, negative effects on the career prospects of people with disabilities are reported in various forms. Workers with disabilities are more likely than those without to report challenges in both getting hired and switching between jobs; sizeable proportions say they have been refused opportunities or promotions at work due to their disability. The literature also indicates that people with disabilities tend to score lower on measures of engagement and satisfaction with their workplace. People with disabilities also consistently report higher levels of harassment and discrimination at work. Where the comparison is possible, it is also noted that employees who receive accommodations tend to report higher scores on many of these same measures than those who do not (thereby suggesting that the provision of accommodation closes the gap with people without disabilities, if not eliminating it).

### **Benchmarking Study result**

The Benchmarking Study found that many respondents have negative perceptions of their career prospects in the Government of Canada: four in ten (41%) view their prospects with the Government of Canada over the next five years as negative. One reason given for their pessimism is that their condition or disability requires an accommodation for the interview itself and many supervisors do not want to take on a team member who requires an accommodation. Many also said that they had opted out of a staffing process because of

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workplace barriers related to their disability (49%) or had been denied a promotional opportunity at a position they were qualified for because of their disability or condition (41%).

Reported experiences of harassment (29%) and discrimination (23%) were common among Government of Canada employees with a disability who participated in the Public Service Employee Survey; these reported levels are even higher among Benchmarking Study respondents, all of whom had made an accommodation request for a health condition or disability in the previous three years (38% report experiencing harassment and 35% discrimination). Moreover, more than eight in ten who said they experienced discrimination linked it to their health condition or disability, and seven in ten said the same about their experience with harassment. Overall, the evidence suggests a link may exist between requesting an accommodation and being subjected to harassment or discrimination.

### **Findings from the literature**

The literature demonstrates that difficulties in advancing their career are common among those with a disability:

- One in five (19%) employees with disabilities in the Public Service Employee Survey say that accessibility or accommodation issues have adversely affected their career in the past 12 months

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- Canadian Survey on Disability results show that four in ten (39%) employed people with disabilities said it would be difficult to change jobs or to advance in their present job as a result of their disability and one quarter (23%) identified discrimination and stigma as the reason
- In research for Employment and Social Development Canada (Quorus, 2019), about one third of those with a disability said they always, often or sometimes face a barrier finding meaningful work (36%), moving up in an organization (34%) or being hired (32%)
- Among Australian public servants, almost half (48%) of people with a disability were dissatisfied with opportunities for career progression (significantly higher than the dissatisfaction level of people without disability (41%)) (University of Canberra, 2016)
- Research by UNISON in the United Kingdom found that three in ten (31%) workers with disabilities felt they had been unfairly treated because of their disability-related sickness record; a similar proportion (32%) said they did not have equal access to promotion

Instances of harassment and discrimination are commonly reported by people with disabilities across studies. The Canberra University study of Australian public servants found that 30% of employees with a disability reported experiences

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with workplace harassment and bullying, twice the rate of those without a disability (15%); these proportions are very similar to those reported in the Public Service Employee Survey (29% of people with a disability and 12% of those without).

The Public Service Employee Survey study shows that employees with disabilities not only face greater discrimination and harassment but also have lower levels of workplace-related satisfaction on multiple measures (including satisfaction with their department, being treated with respect, respecting individual differences and supporting a diverse workplace). The Ontario public service and British Columbia public employee surveys found that employees with disabilities are less engaged across many characteristics. Among British Columbia employees, the overall engagement score for people with disabilities was 58 (out of 100), compared to 66 for those without disabilities. This gap in engagement held true across age groups, locations, job classifications and gender.

In an examination of 2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey data from Statistics Canada, Breward (2016) observed that past experiences with discrimination were associated with higher rates of accommodation requests. This echoes the higher rates of discrimination and harassment among those requesting an accommodation in the Benchmarking Study than among Public Service Employee Survey participants with a



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disability as a whole (who haven't necessarily made an accommodation request). This suggests a connection between requesting an accommodation and experiences of harassment and discrimination, although causality is unclear.

The reviewed literature points to many instances of positive outcomes for both employees and the organization as a whole when accommodations are provided. Among those who received an accommodation in the Public Service Employee Survey data, 80% strongly or somewhat agreed that they are satisfied with the measures. The Cornell research shows that individuals whose accommodation requests were fully granted had better attitudes on important workplace measures: they hold significantly more positive views about their organization and about the level of support received. An analysis of accommodation requests among those with sensory disabilities in the United States found that requests for and uses of workplace accommodations were associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and job performance (Dong and Guerette, 2013).

The following quote summarizes the findings from the Cornell research about the positive views of the benefits of accommodation, but results such as this are common in the literature:

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72% of employees with disabilities reported the accommodation made it more likely the employee will stay at the company, compared to 81% of co-workers ( $p < .05$ ) and 68% of managers. There was also strong agreement that accommodations increased the employee's morale or job satisfaction (71%, 76%, and 72%, respectively) and decreased the employee's stress at work (65%, 67%, and 62%, respectively). (...) Strong majorities of all three groups (71% of workers with and without disabilities reporting on own accommodations, and 81% of co-workers and 68% of managers reporting on disability accommodations) reported that the accommodation made it more likely the employee would stay with the company. Employees without disabilities who received accommodations reported the same pattern of benefits as employees with disabilities." (Cornell, page 25)

Making accommodations widely available to employees and potential employees can help close the "employment gap." The 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability indicates that unemployed people with disabilities are more likely than their employed counterparts to say they would require work accommodations (59% versus 42%) (Till et al., 2015). This means that with appropriate accommodation, the employment gap would

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narrow and shows that a lack of accommodations is a driver of that gap (Prince, 2016).

Finally, a review of existing literature on the subject of labour force participation among those with disabilities (Bonaccio, 2020) highlights challenges that people with disabilities have with the job interview process, including a common inability to get accommodations in the process for those who need them and evidence that “interviewers negatively react to job candidates’ disabilities in an interview context” (page 146). The UNISON research details experiences among employees, especially neuro-diverse respondents, who have lacked accommodations in the interview process. These findings echo the observation from some employees in the Benchmarking Study about difficulties getting accommodations necessary for a job interview and the impression that requesting such accommodations makes getting the position less likely.

### **2. Unmet accommodation needs**

While most of those who require an accommodation receive one, there is evidence of unmet need which can lead to employees quitting, retiring early or taking sick leave.

The literature suggests that people who require accommodations in their workplace typically receive them.

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When accommodations are provided, they are usually positively received by both employees and their supervisors in terms of satisfaction and effectiveness. Despite this, there appears to be unmet needs which can lead to negative outcomes for employees and employers, including sick leave or the employee leaving their position (or retiring early).

### **Benchmarking Study result**

In the Benchmarking Study, most employees whose accommodation outcome was known say their request was approved (86% in Phase 1 and 90% in Phase 2). Since the research focused on those who had already made a request, it is unknown what proportion of employees with disabilities may benefit from an accommodation but have not asked.

Four in ten (40%) who made an accommodation request related to a health condition or disability in Phase 2 of said that they have taken extended sick leave due to a lack of appropriate accommodation that subsequently aggravated their condition. Among employees whose accommodation request was rejected, leaving their position or taking early retirement or extended sick leave were some commonly mentioned options when asked what they planned to do next.

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## Findings from the literature

Various sources provide information about the proportion of met and unmet need among employees in various groups. The Public Service Employee Survey results reveal that four in five (81%) employees who requested an accommodation in the last two years said that measures were taken to accommodate them (resulting in 19% with unmet need). In the Ontario public service, a total of 42% of employees with disabilities say they require an accommodation for their disability to perform their job (36% requested one and 6% did not). Among those who requested an accommodation, 80% say they have been provided with what they need to perform their job (indicating the remaining 20% have not).

A Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work study of Canadians who have chronic health problems found that, among those with permanent employment who say they require an accommodation, 31% received everything that they asked for, 33% received some of what they asked for, 26% needed accommodation but did not ask their employer, and 10% asked but did not receive the accommodation. The Welsh Trade Union Congress research, conducted primarily with public sector employees, showed that a significant minority of 14% of respondents with disabilities said that “their employers did not put in place reasonable adjustments at all. In some cases, requests were either refused, ignored completely or

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wholly inappropriate ‘adjustments’ were offered instead.” (page 41). The Canadian Survey on Disability data show that, among Canadian employees with a disability who required a workplace accommodation, two in five had only some (19%) or none (21%) of their needs met. Of those with at least one unmet need for workplace accommodations, 25% said they did make a request for them to their employer or supervisor. However, 40% were refused their request (Morris, 2019).

As the workforce ages, more people will require accommodation and there is evidence that unmet accommodation needs result in people with disabilities voluntarily leaving the workforce. Banks et al. (2013) observed that the incidence of disabilities related to agility, pain and sight in the Canadian labour market falls after 60 years of age despite increasing prevalence in the population, likely reflecting voluntary retirement choices among those employees. The UNISON research describes how a “worrying number of respondents reported that they had had to leave their job or were fired as a result of not being able to carry out their role as reasonable adjustments had not been provided. Whether this was due to resignation, dismissal, redundancy or being pressured into taking medical health retirement, respondents felt that they had been forced into this position due to a failure to provide reasonable adjustments.” (page 10)

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Early retirement due to lack of accommodation is a concern for the federal public service as their workforce ages. The Benchmarking Study showed that early retirement is a common consideration among those whose accommodation request is denied. Research by Action on Hearing Loss (Hidden Disadvantage, 2013) shows that, among respondents with hearing-related disabilities who were retired, a quarter (26%) said that they retired earlier than they wanted to and that it was directly related to their hearing loss.

Dong and Guerette (2013) found that older workers (aged 45+) were less likely than younger workers to request and to receive accommodations. While no such differences among age groups were observed during the Benchmarking Study in terms of approval of their request, it is possible that unmet need is higher among older employees who may simply see any barriers related to their disability as a typical part of aging:

Previous studies suggest that older workers with various impairments were less likely to use assistive technology in the workplace. These lower requesting and receiving rates may be explained by older workers who attributed their functional employment needs to aging rather than disability. With the aging workforce and a higher prevalence of sensory impairment among older workers, there is an urgent need for workplace

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accommodation among this group. (Dong and Guerette, 2013, page 17).

Proper accommodation appears to minimize early retirement. A paper using longitudinal data from the United States Health and Retirement Study (Hill et al., 2016) and focused on employees with newly identified disabilities in their fifties revealed that workers who are accommodated by their employers are 40% more likely to still be working in the survey wave immediately following disability onset than those who were not. The authors concluded that ensuring accommodations for older workers are proactively offered and implemented is a successful approach to limiting the number of those who choose early retirement.

## **C. Accommodation process**

### **1. Process problems and delays**

The literature commonly finds procedural issues in the accommodation process that are similar to those noted in the Benchmarking Study and mainly revolve around delays in approving and implementing accommodations.

The process for providing accommodations to employees is not the focus of most of the sources reviewed here, but procedural issues are nonetheless noted from a range of



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sources. Some process-related issues raised during the Benchmarking Study are similarly found elsewhere, despite variation in workplace types. Procedural issues can result in delays in implementing accommodations, which can lead to negative outcomes for employees.

### **Benchmarking Study result**

Both employees and supervisors from the Benchmarking Study see the existing accommodation request system as cumbersome, time consuming and complex. Supervisors raised specific concerns about the procurement system and a lack of support and input from functional experts. Employees raised concerns about the length of time to receive a decision, a lack of clarity about how to initiate the process, the need for support from an advocate to help navigate the process and act on their behalf, the need to request the same accommodation numerous times and a lack of follow-up during and after implementation.

### **Findings from the literature**

The large Canadian studies described in this review (Public Service Employee Survey and Canadian Survey on Disability) dealt with accommodations but did not dig deeply into the process involved.

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While there is limited research about the specifics of the process in the Canadian context, research from the United Kingdom and Australian sources has explored more aspects of the process and provided numerous insights that corroborate the results of the Benchmarking Study.

The study of Australian public servants by the University of Canberra identified the process to receive a “reasonable adjustment” to be a barrier to workplace participation for people with a disability. The main issues are the time taken to make accommodations and knowing who to go to for help (page 52), both of which are mentioned in the Benchmarking Study. Some people reported that they had to wait from four to 12 weeks for specialized equipment to arrive and be installed, and that the process required for getting an accommodation is seen as a “hard fight,” as well as being alienating and stressful.

A study of employees from the Welsh Trade Union Congress found that, while 76% of public sector employees say that their workplace has in place “reasonable adjustments,” the process for requesting such accommodations has a number of problems:

- **Delays:** Some respondents noted that although their employer did carry out accommodations, they were not carried out promptly. Some workers with disabilities

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described waiting months, and even years, for accommodations they needed.

- **Poor management or implementation:** Responses showed that some requests for accommodations were poorly managed or monitored. This not only affected people's ability to do their job but, in some cases, caused their health to deteriorate.

The UNISON study in the United Kingdom of union members who have disabilities showed that, even after accommodations were agreed to, respondents often spent significant time waiting for implementation. Only 27% waited less than a month and 38% waited for at least six months (including 23% who waited more than a year). The delays in implementation led to physical, emotional and financial difficulties. Many who did not receive accommodation were forced to take sick leave and others left their job or retired early. The study specifically recommends statutory timescales within which an employer would need to respond to a request for accommodation, as well as providing written reasoning when a request is rejected.

The University of Canberra research also points out that employees suggest including an independent intermediary (who is not part of Human Resources) with specific expertise in non-medical models of disability and reasonable accommodations. This person could act as an independent

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third-party supporting supervisors and people with disabilities in developing plans for providing reasonable accommodations.

An in-depth case study of the Lloyds Banking Group in the United Kingdom provided specific information and recommendations about the processes for accommodating employees that have been successfully introduced in that organization. It explains and demonstrates success for each of the process-related changes made during their transition to a new accommodations system, including:

- Clarification to ensure that supervisors knew their expectations and role in the process in terms of approving and implementing accommodations
- Assuring appropriate involvement from Human Resources and Occupational Health to ensure they are only engaged when absolutely necessary
- Creating a single point of entry that includes qualified third-party experts, minimizes or eliminates the need for assessments and speeds up the process. A single third-party case manager was assigned for each case

### **2. Need for a centralized process**

Direct supervisors play a major role in the success and outcome of the accommodation process, but their level of experience and support can vary. A more centralized

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accommodations process, including a central fund, can overcome many of the issues associated with a supervisor-centred approach.

While the accommodations process may differ among the settings explored within this review, and specific details are not always provided, in most situations it appears an employee's direct supervisor handles or approves the employee's request. This gives the direct supervisor a central role in determining whether accommodations are provided, how difficult that process is, how long it can take and the level of support the employee receives. Most supervisors are not experts in disability or accommodations and have limited experience with them. In the Benchmarking Study, many described how the amount of time they spend handling accommodation requests is not understood or appreciated. A more centralized process would limit potentially negative effects that a supervisor could have on an employee's accommodation request, provide for more input by trained experts and make the process faster and easier for everyone.

### **Benchmarking Study result**

Both employees and supervisors within the Benchmarking Study suggested such a centralized and specialized approach to accommodation requests led by neutral, functional experts. Responses to open-ended questions showed both groups feel

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that this approach would relieve the burden (time and resources) placed on supervisors to handle requests, address employee concerns about management reprisals and privacy, overcome the lack of training and expertise among supervisors, and address concerns about the role of Labour Relations (who tend to be the most common departmental lead for the accommodation process, but who are perceived to not be impartial because they primarily represent management's interest). Increased accountability for supervisors in their handling of accommodations request was also a common suggestion. In addition, supervisors raised concerns about the funding of accommodations as, in many cases, the funds must come from team budgets. Supervisors recognized that centralized funding could alleviate pressure on their budgets and remove a potential barrier to approving accommodations. Having the accommodation process reside with a direct supervisor can create the possibility the supervisor will take some kind of punitive action against the employee that could damage their career prospects, such as labelling them a "trouble employee" or providing a bad reference.

### **Findings from the literature**

The University of Canberra research examined the importance of direct supervisors in supporting employees with a disability. Supervisors are described as "important support mechanisms" by 74% of respondents with disabilities and most did feel

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supported by supervisors (65%). However, the proportion who **did not** feel supported by supervisors is higher among people with disabilities (30%) than those without (20%):

Lack of support from supervisors was a key issue described by questionnaire respondents and focus group participants in all departments. Whether poor support was deliberate or not, it was clear that the experience of feeling unsupported was distressing for the person on the receiving end.” (Canberra, page 56)

In the research done in Wales by the Trade Union Congress, a concept that emerges when thinking about disability and accommodations is the “line manager lottery” meaning the likelihood of receiving adequate support depends on the attitude of their particular manager (page 30). The importance of a supportive manager was singled out and “could not be underestimated” when considering the accommodation process (page 43). The research by a consortium led by Cornell University among private-sector United States companies also notes the centrality of the role supervisors play, stating that “unit supervisors exert substantial influence over the accommodation requests of employees with disabilities.” So, while the research suggests most employees with disabilities feel appropriately supported, it is in situations where they do not feel supported that the centrality of the role played by a direct supervisor becomes an issue.

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Research demonstrates that accountability within the accommodations process is an important way to blunt the effects of the “line manager lottery.” As explained in the Trade Union Congress research:

Many respondents indicated that the key problem in their workplace was not the lack of policies covering disability, but the lack of effective implementation and monitoring of such policies. A number felt that more management and corporate accountability was needed if this situation was to change. (page 45)

The in-depth case study of Lloyds (United Kingdom ) workplace accommodation practices describes successful centralization of their accommodations process, including naming a manager responsible for managing the accommodation process from end to end (who reported directly to the Director of Operations).

The Lloyds case study also highlights the positive role played by providing a centralized fund to pay for accommodations. Lloyds shifted to using such a fund and found it relieved individual supervisors of the burden of paying for accommodations from their team’s budget; allowed for a clearer view of the costs of accommodations across the organization; and, allowed for the development of a standardized catalogue of accommodations and equipment,



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which improved procurement processes and reduced costs. An in-depth review of accommodations policies and practices by Emile Tompa et al. explored existing evidence about a range of practices around workplace accommodations, including the use of a centralized fund within organizations. The research they reviewed concluded that “less than 2% of organizations studied that implemented this practice reported it as not effective. Over half of organizations reported that the practice is very effective.” (page 100)

The centralized Lloyds system described above resulted in a number of tangible positive outcomes.

### **Cost savings**

The new system resulted in savings on assessment and service costs per case of 34% in nominal terms. The average overall case cost fell by 53%. The proportion of cases requiring formal assessments was reduced from 80% to 43% of all cases. The first three months using their new system generated cost savings of more than £125,000 (roughly \$228,000 Canadian dollars in 2014 dollars).

### **Productivity gains**

Average case duration decreased from 90 days to 14 days. Using a streamlined catalogue of equipment reduced the costs of individual items. A large majority (85%) of the employees

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using the service reported a significant improvement in their work performance, with 77% reporting a dramatic improvement. Almost two thirds of employees (62%) and supervisors (63%) using the service reported a reduction in absence levels.

### **Improved satisfaction**

Practically all Lloyds supervisors say that the new system is a vast improvement and that other organizations should use it.

## **D. Evidence requirements**

The role that functional experts do, or should, play in the accommodations process is not a major focus of research. Approval by default is not common despite evidence that it can save money and simplify the process.

There is limited information in the literature about the requirement for medical evidence and the impact it has on the accommodation process. The research that does exist suggests that requirements for employees seeking accommodation to provide medical evidence or undergo assessments act as impediments and are generally time-consuming and resource-intensive processes.

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## **Benchmarking Study result**

Both phases of the Benchmarking Study found that, in the federal public service, a medical certificate is required in a large proportion (more than three quarters) of cases to support an accommodation request with around one-in-three employees requiring a formal assessment. This raises the possibility that accommodation is still viewed through the “medical model” of disability and not a “yes-by-default” perspective. A common theme among many employees and supervisors in the Benchmarking Study is that accommodation requests should be approved by default unless there is an objectively justifiable reason to question the validity of the request. Both supervisors and employees also show strong support for the idea of an “accommodation passport” to document current and past accommodations and to facilitate the transfer of approved accommodations to other departments or positions (that is, thereby reducing the need for repeated assessments).

## **Findings from the literature**

The research suggests that how an organization conceptualizes disability affects their accommodation process. The University of Canberra research describes the “medical model” of disability as one that fails to acknowledge positive aspects of disability and that places responsibility for the

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barriers faced by people with disability on the individual rather than on how society is structured. Their research commonly observed a perception within the Australian public service that disability is something that must be “managed” or is a “problem to be fixed” (page 48).

The transformation of the Lloyds accommodation process is a dramatic shift in the way they conceptualize accommodations within their organization. This transformation included not just a more proactive approach, but a shift in how accommodations interact with medical evidence.

The Lloyds approach shifted from “reasonable adjustment” to “workplace adjustment,” meaning they moved away from legal compliance to actively trusting employees and seeking to accommodate them. The organization moved to a system that no longer forces employees to “prove” their need for accommodation by being referred to Human Resources or Occupational Health. Focusing on barriers instead of a medical diagnosis reflected a direct shift away from the “medical model” of disability. In addition, a process was introduced to fast-track approval of some accommodations based on recommendations from the case manager using pre-approved items without the need for a lengthy process or assessments. The organization also established a single, well-publicized point of entry staffed by experienced, neutral people and

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geared to provide accommodations as “straight through orders” when possible, thus eliminating unnecessary assessments.

### **Clarity around the role of medical experts**

Although often raised by respondents in the Benchmarking Study, issues about the role of evidence from medical experts in supervisors’ decision-making process were not widely discussed by other research sources. Tompa et al. discussed the benefits of employers partnering with outside organizations who can provide accommodation expertise (such as the Job Accommodation Network) as long as the employee remains an active partner in the process. However, beyond this, there is limited information about the specific role that medical and functional experts play within the accommodation process generally.

### **Approvals by default**

Similarly, few of the research sources reviewed, outside of the Lloyds case study, discuss the possibility of “approval by default” despite numerous references to cumbersome processes and the real possibility of denial of an accommodation request (resulting in an unmet need). It is unclear from the research how often approval by default has been considered a possibility in other organizations or jurisdictions.

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### **Accommodations passport**

The Trade Union Congress research with Welsh workers noted that a “personal workplace passports” approach, when managed and implemented properly, would be helpful, particularly for workers who frequently experienced changes in line management. The University of Canberra research report also lists the disability passport approach as a recommended action to enhance individual capability based on their research with Australian public service employees.

### Conclusions and recommendations

The existing body of research literature validates many of the findings of the Benchmark Study and provides further evidence about the working experience of people with disabilities, and particularly how to improve the accommodations process.

The most exhaustive and in-depth set of recommendations is presented in the Lloyds Banking Group case study by the Business Disability Forum. The paper describes how Lloyds re-engineered their workplace accommodation process between 2010 and 2013. The results are both directly relevant to the findings of the Benchmarking Study and are very instructive. The case study used employee surveys and client relationship management database information at different points during the transition to the new system to measure changes in key outcome measures. The system Lloyds had in place prior to 2010 is described as “complex and inefficient” in that it created a heavy burden for supervisors and took too long for employees to receive accommodations. The description of their pre-transition system shares many of the same elements as Canada’s current federal public service system and are summarized below:

- Supervisors often struggled to get appropriate advice and guidance on accommodations and lacked disability-specific knowledge

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- A lack of clear policies and guidelines existed as to what accommodations could be provided and whether they had permission from senior management to implement them
- A lack of designated management accountability at every stage to ensure quality
- The reliance on their direct manager to handle the accommodation could lead to tension in the relationship with the employee
- Budget responsibility for accommodations was with individual teams
- There was a great deal of variation in the working of the system and no assurance that the most effective accommodation would be implemented
- All accommodations were referred to Human Resources and often involved assessments by Occupational Health, even in cases where it was not necessary

The transition to the new system demonstrated the value of numerous recommendations that are directly relevant to the Treasury Board Secretariat. The following recommendations are based on evidence about the barriers to employment facing people with disabilities and best practices in accommodation, drawn from the body of literature encompassed in this review.



## **Accommodation leads to higher employment and retention among those with disabilities**

Research from all countries included in this review mentions the “employment gap” among people with and without a disability. Accommodations play a vital role in narrowing that gap by allowing those with disabilities to enter and stay in the labour market. The research demonstrates that employees who require and receive accommodation are more engaged, productive and likely to stay employed, whether their disability is long-term or occurs during their working life. Older employees who receive accommodations are also less likely to retire prematurely.

## **Develop a more open and accepting orientation around disability and accommodations**

The literature shows that workplaces that highlight the duty to accommodate, where the attitudes of supervisors toward accommodation are open, and where the accommodation process is easy and clear, are more likely to encourage employees to make a request. A more open, proactive and accepting orientation toward accommodations makes it easier for employees who are less assertive and confident to come forward, provides positive spillover effects on the attitudes of co-workers and decreases feelings of stigma that employees

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with disabilities may experience when using their accommodation. As a result, it is advantageous to frame the provision of accommodations as being for **all** employees, not just those with a disability.

### **Better and more training for supervisors and increased sensitivity**

Lack of knowledge and training among supervisors is commonly raised in the literature as a barrier to accommodations. Disability awareness training, sensitivity training and especially training around providing support for those with invisible and mental health conditions help shift the thinking around accommodations away from legal compliance to proactively supporting employees. Ensuring that supervisors are aware of the cost effectiveness of accommodations and their positive spillover effects on other employees should also be a focus.

### **Centralized process**

The literature provides evidence of the advantages of a centralized accommodation process led by neutral resources with expertise in disability and accommodation management and with accountability for the end-to-end accommodation process. Having a single, well-publicized point of entry for all

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accommodations requests within an organization minimizes confusion about the process, increases consistency, makes it easier to effectively track organization-wide accommodations statistics and allows for greater accountability in the handling of requests. A centralized process also addresses potential issues arising from having direct supervisors handle accommodation requests themselves by providing access to functional experts, limiting the potentially negative effects of the “line manager lottery” and reducing supervisors’ time involvement. In addition, the use of neutral resources to manage this process enables a balanced approach that is more likely to meet the needs of both employees and supervisors, while offering support for employees who may need additional assistance by helping them navigate the process and acting on their behalf where required. Finally, a centralized fund would eliminate concerns among supervisors about the cost of accommodations affecting their team budgets. In short, a centralized, neutral accommodation process with clear accountability for the end-to-end process makes requesting and implementing accommodations faster, cheaper and easier for the entire organization.

### **Introduce time frame targets for accommodation implementation**

Several secondary sources support findings from the Benchmarking Study that there is often a long lag between submitting a request and implementing the accommodation, with delays having negative effects on employees. Currently, specific time limits for providing accommodations are not identified within the duty to accommodate legislation in Canadian jurisdictions, but a number of the secondary sources recommend statutory timescales (some as short as 20 days) within which an employer needs to respond or implement the accommodation if approved. Within the federal public service, this could take the form of mandated caps on the time: (a) from an accommodation request to a decision; and (b) from approval to implementation of an accommodation.

### **Reduce the number of assessments and the medicalization of disability**

Although specific references to medical certificates and assessments were not common in the literature, some sources (for example, University of Canberra, Lloyds case study) speak to the way that disability and accommodations are conceptualized in the workplace using the “medical model.” This approach tends to focus more on the provision of medical

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evidence and sets up a more adversarial environment for workplace accommodations where employees often feel they must “prove” they have a disability. The Lloyds case study provides a striking example of the benefits of moving to a system that treats accommodations more proactively, attempts to minimize referrals to Human Resources (requiring assessments) and allows for the fast-tracking of cases using pre-approved items. Outside of this example, however, there was limited evidence in the literature about the role medical and functional experts should play or whether (and which) accommodations should be approved by default.

### **Introduce an accommodation passport**

In addition to receiving widespread approval among both employees and supervisors within the Benchmarking Study, the idea of an “accommodation passport” is mentioned in the secondary literature review in a couple of places, especially in the context of those who are likely to have their line manager change often. An “accommodation passport” would minimize instances where employees would need to make accommodation requests when they switch jobs and instead transfer their approved accommodation to other departments or positions.

## **References**

### **1. Large studies involving feedback from public service employees and/or supervisors**

#### **The Public Service Employee Survey (2019, non-random sample of Government of Canada public sector employees)**

The Public Service Employee Survey is an annual survey made available to all public service employees about their engagement within the public service. The 2019 wave provides data about PS employees as a whole, as well as for those who identify as having a disability and those who do not. It contains a handful of questions specifically about accommodations.

2019 Public Service Employee Survey Results –

<https://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/ps-es-saff/2019/results-resultats/bq-pq/index-eng.aspx>

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### **Lloyds Banking Case Study: Best Practices in the Provision of Workplace Adjustments (2014, case study of pre-and post-intervention)**

This is an in-depth case study about how Lloyds Bank in the United Kingdom re-engineered their workplace accommodation process between 2010 and 2013. Research involving surveys of employees and client relationship management database information at different points in the transition to the new system was used in order to measure the differences these changes made to key outcome measures.

Moving from Ad Hoc to Streamlined Efficiency: The Lloyds Banking Group Case Study –

<http://www.businessanddisability.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/LLOYDS-WORKPLACE-ADJUSTMENTS-CASE-STUDY1.pdf>

### **University of Canberra: Australian Public Service (2016, random sample of public sector employees) and the Institute for Governance and Policy Making**

This is a large study of Australian public servants with disabilities exploring barriers they face in their workplace, including a significant section about accommodations. The respondents were both those with disabilities and those without, allowing for comparisons between the two. Although specific questions were asked about workplace

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accommodations, the survey included broader questions about disability in the workplace that touched on other findings and recommendations from the Benchmarking Study.

Doing it Differently: Staff Perceptions of the Barriers to Workplace Participation Experienced by Public Servants with Disability in the Australian Public Service –

<https://www.governanceinstitute.edu.au/magma/media/upload/ckeditor/files/online-%20disability%20report.pdf>

**British Columbia Work Environment Study: “A deeper look into the engagement among diversity groups” (2017, attempted census of all British Columbia public sector employees)**

The 2015 British Columbia Work Environment Study measured employee engagement among employees of the British Columbia public service using questions with a 5-point Likert scales (similar to the Public Service Employee Survey and Ontario public service survey). The survey included a comparison between those with disabilities and those without disabilities. The report noted here was published in 2017 using results from the 2015 wave of research. Although information from 2019 is available, no analysis was provided in terms of those with and without disabilities.



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A deeper look into the engagement among diversity groups – [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/data/statistics/government/wes/driver-topics/wes\\_deeper\\_look\\_into\\_engagement.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/data/statistics/government/wes/driver-topics/wes_deeper_look_into_engagement.pdf)

### **Ontario Public Service Employee Experience Survey (2018, attempted census of all Ontario public sector employees)**

The 2018 Ontario public service survey measured employee engagement among employees of the Ontario public service by asking a series of questions using 5-point agreement scales. This data was broken out into those who have a disability and those who do not. Overall, 12% identify as having a disability (42% identify it as a mental health issue) and only these respondents were asked about accommodations.

2018 OPS Employee Experience Survey Results – <https://www.ontario.ca/page/2018-ops-employee-experience-survey-results>

### **Wales Trades Union Congress: Disability and “hidden” impairments in the workplace (2018, non-random sample of unionized employees)**

This large study was sent to members of Trade Union Congress unions and includes 74% public sector employees. The focus of the survey focus was disability in the workplace,

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but the survey included specific questions about accommodations.

Disability and ‘hidden’ impairments in the workplace –  
[https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/DHIWsurveyreport  
Eng.pdf](https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/DHIWsurveyreportEng.pdf)

### **Cornell University Consortium: Accommodating Employees Research (non-random sample of United States supervisors and employees)**

This research program involved intensive case studies of eight United States companies and included 5,000 employee surveys, in-depth interviews and focus groups. It examines accommodation requests made and received, a comparison of disability and non-disability accommodation requests, the monetary aspect of accommodations, views about the process from supervisors and employees and how accommodations affect performance among accommodated employees and their co-workers.

Accommodating Employees With and Without Disabilities –  
[https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?articl  
e=2263&context=articles](https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2263&context=articles)

## **2. Large studies of the population of people with disabilities or analysis of survey-based data**

### **2017 Canadian Survey on Disability (large random sample of Canadians with disabilities based on the 2016 census)**

The Canadian Survey on Disability and its earlier iteration, the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, are surveys which were done with a sample of census respondents who identified as having a disability. Given its size and methodological approach, it can be considered a representative sample of people with disabilities in the Canadian public. The survey included a number of questions about employment and disability, including questions specifically about workplace accommodations. The dataset itself is available but the key findings that focus specifically on workplace accommodations are quoted in various sources detailed below in the next section of the references. Some of the Canadian Survey on Disability data was cited in a “Creating an Accessible Workplace” document by Elisabeth Cloutier.

Canadian Survey on Disability Reports –  
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/89-654-X>

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### **Quorus Research for Employment and Social Development Canada (2019, representative or random sample)**

This research, done by Quorus Research for Employment and Social Development Canada, involved surveying both those with a disability and those without in separate samples. The focus of the study was more broadly on accessibility and disability, but it did involve some questions about barriers in the workplace and a question about accommodations. Those without a disability were asked whether they had ever witnessed barriers and those with a disability were asked whether they had experienced barriers.

Government of Canada 2019 Pilot Public Opinion Research Survey on Accessibility – [https://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tpsgc/poref/employment\\_social\\_development\\_canada/2019/012-18-e/report.pdf](https://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tpsgc/poref/employment_social_development_canada/2019/012-18-e/report.pdf)

### **Job Accommodation Network Research**

The Job Accommodation Network has been running ongoing data collection since 2004 involving a follow-up telephone survey using a convenience sample of employers and employees who have contacted the Job Accommodation Network for information about accommodations. The Job Accommodation Network has made available various research

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papers that reference this data, but the sources used in this review was this research briefing entitled “Workplace Accommodations: Low Cost, High Impact.”

Accommodation and Compliance Series: Workplace Accommodations – Low Cost, High Impact –  
<https://askjan.org/publications/Topic-Downloads.cfm?pubid=962628&action=download&pubtype=pdf>

### **Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work survey for Employment and Social Development Canada (2017, non-random sample)**

This study examines the situation for those with episodic health conditions, including a small section about their use of workplace accommodations. It outlines how people with these types of disability differ from those with non-episodic disabilities, including how it affects their ability to participate in the labour force.

People with Episodic Health Conditions Speak out About... –  
<https://www.ccrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Episodic-Survey-Final-Report.pdf>

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### **Business Disability Forum: The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey (2019, non-random sample of United Kingdom workers with disabilities)**

This was a non-random opt-in survey promoted by membership organizations, partners and stakeholders, as well as the disability, Human Resources and business press and social media. A total of 1,200 people responded, including 982 people with a disability, and the survey focused on workplace accommodations in the United Kingdom.

The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey – <https://dh1b0dk701o2c.cloudfront.net/prod/uploads/2020/06/The-Great-Big-Workplace-Adjustments-Survey-main-report.pdf>

### **UNISON Disabled Workers Research Survey (2019, non-random sample of mainly unionized employees)**

This survey involved employees with disabilities who were mostly (98%) members of UNISON unions in the United Kingdom. Survey invitations were sent to email lists and respondents opted in, so it is not a random sample. Workplace adjustments were a major focus of this research.

Let's be Reasonable: Disability Equality in the Workplace – <https://www.unison.org.uk/lets-be-reasonable-disability-equality-in-the-workplace/>

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### **Action on Hearing Loss: Working For Change (2019) and Hidden Disadvantage (2013) (non-random sample of United Kingdom workers with hearing loss)**

These two research programs examined experiences with working among those with hearing loss in the United Kingdom. The first is older but includes a section specifically about workplace accommodations, while the second explores more generic topics about working with hearing loss.

Social research reports –

<https://actiononhearingloss.org.uk/about-us/research-and-policy/social-research-reports/>

Hidden Disadvantage: Why people with hearing loss are still losing out at work – <https://actiononhearingloss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Hidden-Disadvantage-full-report.pdf>

### **3. Other sources**

#### **Banks K., Chaykowski R. P., and Slotsve G. A. (2013). The Disability Accommodation Gap in Canadian Workplaces: What Does It Mean for Law, Policy, and an Aging Population?**

The results of extensive analysis of data from Statistics Canada's 2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey.

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The Disability Accommodation Gap in Canadian Workplaces:  
What Does It Mean for Law, Policy, and an Aging Population?  
(abstract) –

[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3035555](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3035555)

**Bonaccio S., Connelly C. E., Gellatly I. R., Martin Ginis K. A. (2020). The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace Across the Employment Cycle: Employer Concerns and Research Evidence. Journal of Business and Psychology. 35:135–158. Doi:10.1007/s10869-018-9602-5**

Summary and evaluation of empirical evidence about 11 specific concerns employers have about people with disabilities, from pre-employment and entry experiences to the final dissolution of the employment relationship.

The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace Across the Employment Cycle: Employer Concerns and Research Evidence –

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330828324\\_The\\_Participation\\_of\\_People\\_with\\_Disabilities\\_in\\_the\\_Workplace\\_Across\\_the\\_Employment\\_Cycle\\_Employer\\_Concerns\\_and\\_Research\\_Evidence](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330828324_The_Participation_of_People_with_Disabilities_in_the_Workplace_Across_the_Employment_Cycle_Employer_Concerns_and_Research_Evidence)



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**Dong S. and Guerette A. R. (2013). Workplace Accommodations, Job Performance and Job Satisfaction Among Individuals with Sensory Disabilities. Australian Journal of Rehabilitation Counselling, 19(1), 1–20. Doi: 10.1017/jrc.2013.1**

Study examining differences between requesters and non-requesters of workplace accommodations in their self-reported job performance and job satisfaction.

Workplace Accommodations, Job Performance and Job Satisfaction Among Individuals with Sensory Disabilities – [https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/E949989A646391B64B6EA941A4E503BB/S132389221300001Xa.pdf/workplace\\_accommodations\\_job\\_performance\\_and\\_job\\_satisfaction\\_among\\_individuals\\_with\\_sensory\\_disabilities.pdf](https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/E949989A646391B64B6EA941A4E503BB/S132389221300001Xa.pdf/workplace_accommodations_job_performance_and_job_satisfaction_among_individuals_with_sensory_disabilities.pdf)

**Hendricks D. J., Batiste L. C., Hirsh A., Schartz H. A., Blanck P. (2005). Cost and Effectiveness of Accommodation in the Workplace: Preliminary Results of a Nationwide Study. Disability Studies Quarterly. Vol. 24 (4).**

Preliminary analysis of results from the Job Accommodation Network's research, based on interviews with 778 employers and 882 individuals with disabilities.

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Cost and Effectiveness of Accommodations in the Workplace: Preliminary Results of a Nationwide Study – <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/623/800>

**Hill M. J., Maestas N. and Mullen K. J. (2016). Employer Accommodation and Labor Supply of Disabled Workers. *Labour Economics*. 41: 291–303. doi:10.1016/j.labeco.2016.05.013**

Analysis of the United States Health and Retirement Study, which has surveyed individuals aged 51 and older every two years since 1992.

Employer accommodation and labor supply of disabled workers (abstract) – <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0927537116300276>

**Kensbock J. M., Boehm S. A. and Bourovoi K. (2017). Is There a Downside of Job Accommodations? An Employee Perspective on Individual Change Processes. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 8:1536. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.015**

Qualitative research with 73 workers in a large manufacturing plant of a German industrial company, all of whom have received accommodation.

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Is There a Downside of Job Accommodations? An Employee Perspective on Individual Change Processes –

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01536/full>

**Morris S. (2019). Workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities in Canada. Statistics Canada Catalogue No. 89-654-X2019001**

Findings from the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability on requirements and access to workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities.

Workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities in Canada, 2017 – <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2019001-eng.htm>

**Prince M. J. (2016). Inclusive Employment for Canadians with Disabilities: Toward a new Policy Framework and Agenda. Institute for Research on Public Policy, No. 60.**

An analysis of the employment situation and policy context for working-age adults with mental or physical disabilities.

Inclusive Employment for Canadians with Disabilities - <https://irpp.org/research-studies/inclusive-employment-for-canadians-with-disabilities/>

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**Schur L., Nishii L. H., Adya M., Kruse D., Bruyere S. M. and Blanck P. (2014). Accommodating Employees with and Without Disabilities. Retrieved September 16, 2020, from Cornell University**

Study of accommodations requested and granted in intensive case studies of eight companies, based on more than 5,000 employee and manager surveys, and interviews and focus groups with 128 managers and employees with disabilities.

Accommodating Employees With and Without Disabilities (abstract) – <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/1251/>

**Till M., Leonard T., Yeung S. and Nicholls G. (2015). A Profile of the Labour Market Experiences of Adults with Disabilities among Canadians aged 15 years and older, 2012. Statistics Canada Catalogue No. 89-654-X2015005**

Report examining the labour market experiences of people with disabilities using data from the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability.

A Profile of the Labour Market Experiences of Adults with Disabilities Among Canadians Aged 15 and Older, 2012 – <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2015005-eng.htm>

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**Tompa E., Buettgen A., Mahood Q., Padkapayeva K., Posen A. and Yazdani A. (2015). Evidence Synthesis of Workplace Accommodation Policies and Practices for Persons with Visible Disabilities.**

Literature review to identify the workplace accommodations that employers in different workplaces are making for employees with disabilities at the retirement, hiring and working stage.

Evidence Synthesis of Workplace Accommodation Policies and Practices for Persons with Visible Disabilities: Final Report – [https://www.crwdp.ca/sites/default/files/documentuploader/full\\_report\\_-\\_evidence\\_synthesis\\_visible\\_disabilities\\_tompa\\_et\\_al.\\_2015.pdf](https://www.crwdp.ca/sites/default/files/documentuploader/full_report_-_evidence_synthesis_visible_disabilities_tompa_et_al._2015.pdf)