

**The Conference
Board of Canada**



Fostering Inclusion Through Mentorship

A Call to Action From People With Disabilities

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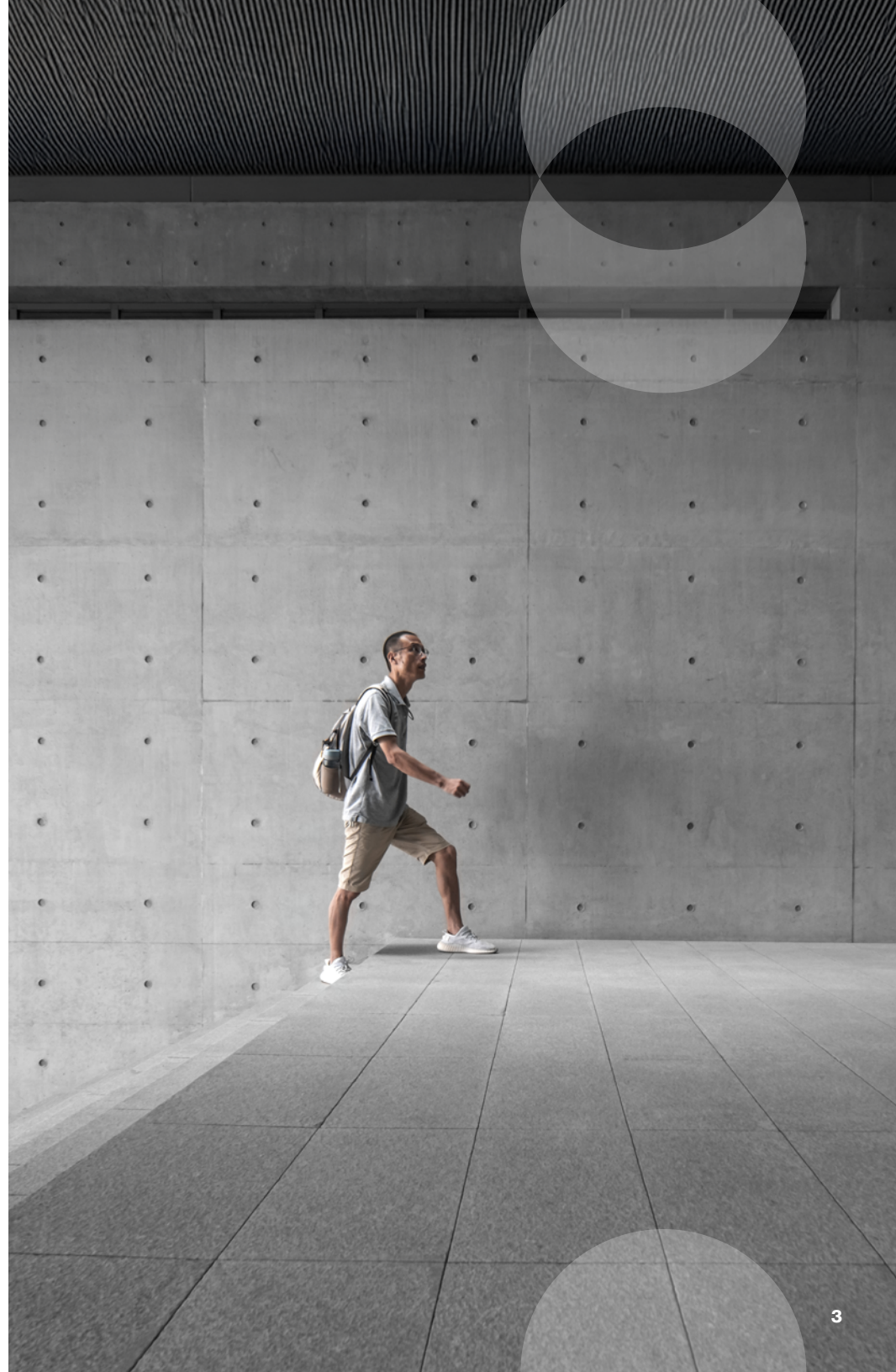
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Key findings

- Our research shows that mentors with disabilities act as co-navigators and teachers for people with disabilities in the workplace, providing specialized support in building advocacy skills that may otherwise be out of reach.
- Self-advocacy is a crucial skill for people with disabilities, as they face increased barriers in securing and maintaining employment.
- Most mentors and mentees (83.3 per cent) in our qualitative study have had positive experiences with mentorship.
- Participants' experiences were positive regardless of the type of mentorship, whether formal or informal relationships.
- Informal mentorships fostered organic connections, but they often lacked the resources and guidance needed for sustaining long-term mentoring relationships.
- Imbalance creates unease—mentors felt the full burden of administration, while mentees sought additional support outside of scheduled meetings to build more personable relationships.
- People with disabilities call on organizations to improve disability inclusion by creating programs that are accessible by design, recognizing mentors for volunteering their time, and creating mentorship programs that are supported by the wider organization.



Fostering belonging: Inclusive mentorship in the workplace

Employers have an opportunity to act on priorities identified by people with disabilities, not only to help close the employment gap, but also to strengthen their competitive edge by building innovative, inclusive workforces shaped by diverse perspectives.

Few studies have directly engaged Canadian adults with disabilities who have been a mentor and/or mentee in the workplace.¹ To fill this void, The Conference Board of Canada, alongside our partner the Canadian Association for Supported Employment, designed and executed a multi-phase mixed-methods study with Canadian working-age adults with disabilities, starting with a nationally representative survey of 1,000 participants and followed by 30 semi-structured interviews with mentors and mentees with disabilities. The survey and interviews were conducted between December 2024 and February 2025. Our goal was to use a survey to explore whether people with disabilities had access to mentorship opportunities and then use interviews to explore how mentorship—or the lack of it—shaped their workplace experiences.

The Conference Board of Canada's 2025 [research](#) has highlighted workplace mentorship's benefits for employees as they progress through their careers.² This level of support is crucial for people with disabilities, as they continue to face barriers in securing and maintaining employment.³

¹ Rubbi Nunan, Ebrahim, and Stander, "Mentoring in the Workplace."

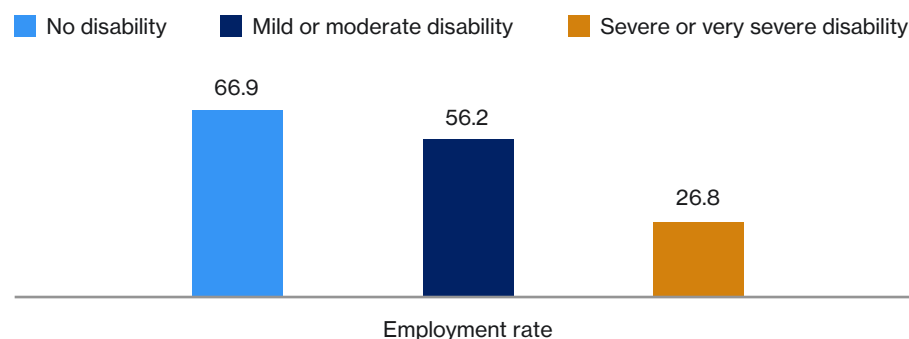
² Coffin and De Melo, *Build Diverse Workforces*.

³ Lindsay Coffin and Tyler De Melo.

While a gap in employment remains for all people with disabilities, this gap is more pronounced for those experiencing severe disabilities.⁴ According to 2023 data from Statistics Canada, the employment rate for people with severe disabilities was 40.1 per cent lower than for people without disabilities (26.8 versus 66.9 per cent).⁵ (See Chart 1.)

Chart 1

Marked employment gap remains for people with disabilities aged 15 and older (per cent)



Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

⁴ Vergara and Hardy, "Labour Market Characteristics."

⁵ Vergara and Hardy.

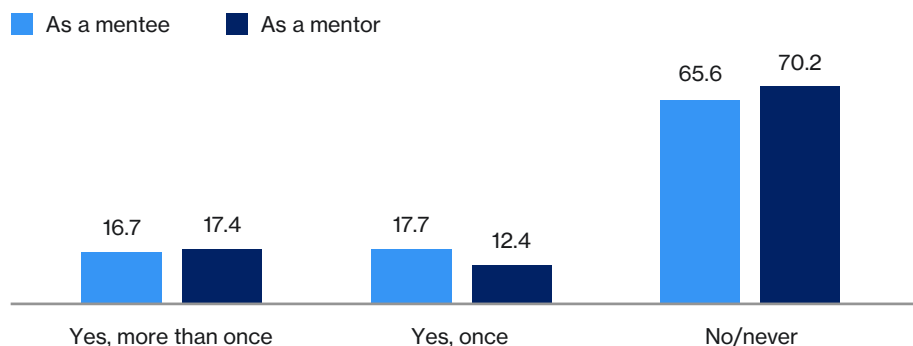
Data from our 2025 survey of individuals with disabilities reveals that mentorship is rare among these individuals. Most respondents had not been involved in mentorship as a mentor (70.2 per cent) or as a mentee (65.6 per cent) in any capacity. Although not directly comparable, Mentor Canada’s 2020 study found that 33 per cent of adults had mentored youth either through a formal program or informally, although just 10 per cent had participated in a formal program. These findings highlight the broader trends around limited access to mentorship opportunities for Canadians. (See Chart 2.)

Chart 2

Most people with disabilities lack access to mentorship

Q: Have you ever been part of a mentoring relationship as a mentee or mentor?

(n = 1,000; per cent)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Respondents who participated in mentoring relationships as mentees identified three key benefits of having a mentor: developing new skills and knowledge (58.7 per cent), boosting their confidence (50.9 per cent), and receiving advice and guidance (47.4 per cent). (See Chart 3.)

Chart 3

Few people with disabilities have learned from a mentor with a disability

Q: What benefits did you gain from having a mentor?

(n = 1,000; per cent)



Note: The percentages do not add up to 100 per cent as respondents were able to select multiple options.
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Inclusive mentorship fosters partnerships

Researchers have historically understood mentorship as a relationship in which mentors provide knowledge, skills, and experiences to a less experienced mentee, but this understanding has been challenged.⁶ Interactions between mentors and mentees in the workplace have shifted from solely skills development and knowledge transfer to relationships that resemble critical reflection and application for both participants in the relationship.⁷ Mentors and mentees are collaborative partners in their mentoring experience, wherein learning and goal setting is self-directed by the mentees.⁸ For example, one mentee in our study described their mentoring relationship as exploring whether a senior-level position in the public service aligned with their career vision while also creating a more personable relationship by exploring each other's culture.

In our study, we understand mentorship as partnerships that are typically time-bound, interactive, and focused on achieving both mentor and mentee goals. Mentors and mentees accomplish this through a broad range of activities, such as career development, emotional support, skill building, and psychosocial support. Their relationship is reciprocal, continuous, and personable.

For people with disabilities, the role of the mentor in the workplace can transform beyond the confines of a role model and coach.⁹ Mentorship can act as a guide for mentees with disabilities in understanding their rights and strengthening their communication skills to articulate their needs.¹⁰

We found that self-advocacy is a vital skill that people with disabilities must learn—and continually refine—to navigate barriers at work. Interviewees described advocating for workplace accommodations, better-informed human resources (HR) policies that integrate their perspectives, and, in some cases, safeguarding their employment during times of organizational change.

“You have to learn to be a strategic communicator in the workplace. People would reply angrily when changes were made to drug plans or sick day allotments, and then they were let go in the next round of layoff[s].”

Mentor

⁶ Kram, “Mentoring at Work”; and Rubbi Nunan, Ebrahim, and Stander, “Mentoring in the Workplace.”

⁷ Rubbi Nunan, Ebrahim, and Stander, “Mentoring in the Workplace.”

⁸ Rubbi Nunan, Ebrahim, and Stander.

⁹ Canadian Association for Supported Employment and Mentor Canada, *Mentoring for Persons Experiencing Disabilities*.

¹⁰ Canadian Association for Supported Employment and Mentor Canada.

However, the self-advocacy skills of people with disabilities varied across mentors and mentees. Unsurprisingly, mentors often demonstrated greater confidence in navigating workplace challenges than mentees, due to having more work experience and, with it, more opportunities to practise self-advocacy. This finding suggests a potential experience gap in self-advocacy for Canadian workers with disabilities, depending on whether they have more or less work experience or recently acquired a disability.

Results from our survey indicated this trend with age for the disclosure of a disability. We found that employees aged 18 to 34 were 17.3 percentage points less likely to disclose their disability status than employees aged 35 and older. While disclosure is not equivalent to self-advocacy, it is often the first step in requesting accommodation and support, which requires self-advocacy to effectively articulate needs.

To bridge this gap, mentors spoke of leveraging their self-advocacy experience to guide their mentees through complex work atmospheres. For mentees with disabilities, these relationships went beyond peer support—mentors became co-navigators in the workplace, guiding them through challenges they had experienced firsthand. As co-navigators, mentors taught self-advocacy skills to their mentees, transferring the knowledge necessary to execute these skills to make workplaces more accessible.

In their own words

“I had to be a bit fierce. There were times whe[n] I negotiated on behalf of the mentee in our co-op. If we don’t, then we lose some of the potentially best people in the field because people who have lived experience make fantastic professionals.”

Mentor

“I’d get defensive, because I like my mentees, and I was one-on-one with them. I could see that they were doing their level best. I [explained to management], ‘You have got to give these guys space and then they are going to be great.’”

Mentor

“My mentorship program was about trying to provide [mentees with disabilities] with resources and help them advocate for themselves, because that’s a big barrier.”

Mentor



Long-term impact of mentorship

Most mentors and mentees we interviewed (83.3 per cent) described mentorship as a positive experience. For some mentees, the connection formed with their mentor evolved into lasting mentoring relationships or friendships, providing support beyond the workplace.

In their own words

“My mentorship experience has changed my life. I am a better person because of it, and I make better decisions in my life.”

Mentee

“In the three-plus years of being a mentee, I learned how to stand up for myself, be confident in my [abilities and intelligence].”

Mentee

“All the skills I’ve learned through business, [being a chef], and talking to mentors, you take those skills, and you don’t just apply them to your career. You apply them to all aspects in your life.”

Mentee

Transitioning from mentee to mentor

Our research identified an association between being mentored and later transitioning into a mentoring role. While the factors that influence this transition vary, one common reason we heard is that many mentees, having experienced the value and impact of mentorship firsthand, feel motivated to contribute to another person’s success. Mentees told us they felt a responsibility to “pay it forward.”

In their own words

“I originally went through several programs that were designed [for people with disabilities]. The organization running the program then asked me, [because of my experiences in the program as a mentee], if I would want to become a mentor, which is something I later did.”

Mentee

“I went on to become a mentor in the same program. Every year, for the past four years, I [have partnered with] a new mentee for six months.”

Mentee

Mentorship areas

Matching

The Conference Board of Canada's 2025 Inclusive Mentorship Program Toolkit highlights that successful mentorships are influenced by pairing mentors and mentees based on factors such as availability, goals, job role, location, lived experience, and outside interests. While research has identified the benefits of matching two individuals with lived experiences,¹¹ we found the preferences of people with disabilities must be considered when matching mentorship pairs.

Many interviewees who preferred a mentor with disabilities noted that someone without disabilities may struggle to understand the experiences of people with disabilities. They emphasized that people without disabilities may not be able to effectively support or fully grasp unique challenges in the same way an individual with lived experience can.

In their own words

“You should not pretend that you totally understand our situation, issue, or context.”

Mentee

“I would say that there needs to be a fundamental level of understanding, and I think that often that comes from lived experience.”

Mentee

“I have spoken to colleagues about my story, but nobody who really has lived it the way I've lived it. [I prefer] somebody who has a disability and I'm able to discuss with them, 'What challenges did you have?' You don't want to burden those you won't be able to get answers from.”

Mentee

“Mentors don't have the lived experience. What I mean by that is they don't know the inner secrecies of doing certain things differently.”

Mentor

¹¹ McDaniels and Asiedu, “The Role of Mentorship.”

Mentor-led vetting

Mentors also spoke about the importance of vetting their mentees through an interview process. They noted that this vetting goes both ways: mentors assess whether their mentees are a good fit for them while acknowledging that they may not check off all boxes for mentees. However, vetting appeared to be a mentor-specific tool used in relationships, as mentees did not speak to the same process during their interviews.

In their own words

“I vet my mentees fairly [well]. Sitting down with a coffee or getting to know somebody and then being clear on expectations.”

Mentor

“I have always insisted on interviewing mentees to make sure that I believe I’m a good fit for them.”

Mentor



Challenges with informal mentoring relationships

Research has defined mentoring relationships within two categories: formal and informal.¹² Formal mentorship is typically a structured program created by employers to replicate or supplement the benefits received in informal mentoring relationships.¹³ In informal mentorships, relationships form organically based on common interests, goals, or needs.¹⁴

Most interviewees described their involvement in informal mentoring relationships. These types of relationships often lacked access to structured support typically offered by formal mentorship programs, such as guidance and resources. Without the backing of the employer, tasks such as building out guidelines, creating resources, and navigating accessibility often fell to the mentor and mentee.

“There wasn’t a workbook or anything like that, any kind of study situation where I could gain the experience of what I should be doing as a mentor. I just did what I thought was right.”

Mentor

¹² Canadian Association for Supported Employment and Mentor Canada, *Mentoring for Persons Experiencing Disabilities*.

¹³ Canadian Association for Supported Employment and Mentor Canada.

¹⁴ Janssen, van Vuuren, and de Jong, “Informal Mentoring at Work.”

Interviewees spoke to a tension when asked about aspects of the mentorship that they would improve. Mentors felt overwhelmed by the responsibility of supporting their mentees, while mentees expressed a need for additional connection points outside of scheduled meetings, primarily from a desire to build a deeper relationship with their mentor.

In their own words

“I would say the one thing that’s hard is people with disabilities are the best suited to do this because we are the ones who know what works. But that also means you’re overburdening your employees with disabilities. You’re adding the responsibility of having to mentor people.”

Mentor

“After our sessions we would schedule the next session. I needed more spontaneous touch points beyond just, like, scheduled sessions.”

Mentee

“Having a scheduled time and specific deadlines that need to be met. More structure in mentorship, around communication, would better the relationship and make it easier to navigate your way through it.”

Mentee

Interviewees stressed the importance of having structure and guidance within the relationship, allowing participant flexibility to determine how their relationship evolves within the confines of the program’s structure.

In their own words

“The organic process feels different. I think that it’s more based on immediate needs of the mentee. It’s more of a loose connection with somebody that can develop into a more structured relationship.”

Mentor

“Because the program was a pilot, there was flexibility for the mentee and mentor to construct the scope and format of the mentorship. It had a basic foundation with information on the program, but it was open in terms of how participants would run through the program and manage the relationship.”

Mentee



A call to action from people with disabilities

We asked 15 mentees and 15 mentors how employers can improve workplace inclusion for people with disabilities. Their responses form a powerful call to action.

Don't say you value diversity—show us

While the discussions with people with disabilities focused on mentorship, interviewees took the opportunity to reiterate the importance of broader needs—their experiences with HR systems and processes meant to support them. For example, if systems meant to support employees, such as requesting accommodation, are difficult to navigate, employees with disabilities will perceive their organization's efforts in fostering disability to be insincere. It's no surprise, then, that when asked how employers can enhance disability inclusion through mentorship, interviewees emphasized the gap between diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and their lived realities.

Organizations can overcome these challenges by listening to their employees' experiences. By using employee feedback, organizations can implement improvements, such as adding banded columns to a bookkeeping ledger, as one interviewee shared after requesting support from the information technology team. These changes build over time, benefiting not only people with disabilities but the entire workforce.

In their own words

“As far as I'm concerned, talk is cheap. Anybody can write [that their workplace is diverse] on a piece of paper. If you can't back up what you're saying, then what's the point?”

Mentee

“I know if I reached out to talk about a specific issue that I'm having [in university] that someone would know how to direct me. Versus in the work environment where leadership would say that they're inclusive, but I didn't personally witness any examples from them.”

Mentor



Demonstrate that you value your mentors

Mentors and mentees consistently reported a powerful sense of personal reward from their involvement in mentoring relationships. What made the difference? Mentors cited two key factors that motivated them to continue their mentoring role: leadership support, which can include recognizing mentors with awards, and the personal satisfaction of seeing their mentees grow. These factors create sustainable mentor pipelines within the workplace—people with disabilities feel empowered and inspired to contribute to others' success as mentors.

In their own words

“I know it's odd but there's a hierarchy of leadership and you always want to feel valued. I think that was very important [for my success as a mentor] in the mentorship program.”

Mentor

“It's about connecting. And finding the right matches. But the reward [of mentorship] is always greater than the effort you put in, in my experience.”

Mentor

“After several years my manager started having other people working with someone who was closer to the person, such as a female–female relationship. I felt very rewarded that I was the first person in this program for my company.”

Mentor

Fuel employee success with mentorship that starts on day one

For those who participated in workplace mentorship, many mentoring relationships began early, often through onboarding. For example, many interviewees emphasized the value of having a knowledgeable mentor to ask questions to and learn from, particularly when starting at a new company or for recent graduates entering the workforce. For many mentees, having someone to rely on during this process was crucial to their success—whether to facilitate connection between employees or to navigate obstacles when joining an unfamiliar organization.

“I had time to ask my mentor questions. If I was out of ideas, I could ask her, and she would say, ‘Well, you should try this.’ It gave insights that I wouldn't have [gotten] because everyone else is trying to survive their day.”

Mentee



Mentorship takes infrastructure – help lay the foundation

Mentors shared that the responsibility of administering the mentorship program—such as building out onboarding resources for their mentees—often fell to them. With many relationships being informal, employer support was limited, and mentors were sometimes unsure how to guide their mentees. Some adapted by creating their own tools, like designing interviews to vet their mentees. When asked how organizations can better support mentorship, interviewees recommended employers assign dedicated staff or a team to oversee the program. This support could include onboarding new mentors and mentees, providing resources, evaluating success, and supporting the matching process to strengthen mentorship outcomes.

In their own words

“I feel like management needs to do the lift[ing] on matching you with someone. There’s a lot that the [organization] can do and leave the actual mentorship to their employees with disabilities.”

Mentor

“I thought that I could have used a little more backing by the company. I was mid level in the situation, and I had to rely on my bosses and [their superiors to make decisions].”

Mentor

“My recommendation would be to have somebody who’s specifically in the role of overseeing everything. This person would have enough knowledge of the program, so they can make sure it’s being facilitated properly.”

Mentee

“We see more people with disabilities out in the workforce today because of opportunities through mentorship. A lot more can be gained by inclusion than lost: respect, understanding, and [empowerment].”

Mentor

“Mentorship wasn’t something I expected to come into my life. I’ve spent most of my life doing everything alone. Finding my mentor showed me people care, people can want you to grow and learn.”

Mentee

Appendix A

Methodology

About the research

The Conference Board of Canada conducted two phases of research (Phases 1 and 2) and a final phase for comprehensive reporting on the quantitative and qualitative data (Phase 4). Phase 3 (not depicted in this briefing) was focused on disseminating the research findings using presentations and webinars to external stakeholders.

In Phase 1, we conducted a survey focused on the experiences of working-age adults with disabilities. Our survey gathered data on disability disclosure, past experiences with accommodation requests and mentoring, and standard demographic information (e.g., gender, age, province). We used the following research question to guide the study: From the perspectives of people with disabilities, what are the current facilitators and barriers to disability disclosure in the workplace?

We followed Phase 1 with a qualitative-focused Phase 2. We conducted interviews and roundtables with employers, as well as interviews with mentors and mentees with lived experience of disability. We used the following research questions to guide Phase 2:

- What are the key features of mentoring initiatives that effectively foster disability inclusion within organizations?
- What challenges do mentors and mentees with disabilities face in company-sponsored mentoring programs?
- How can organizations effectively implement mentoring initiatives for disability inclusion?

Detailed methods

Phase 1

Employee survey

Our Phase 1 survey was developed based on findings from our literature search on disability disclosure in the workplace. Questions were reviewed by both the Canadian Association for Supported Employment and the project's Research Advisory Board.

The online survey was open from December 17, 2024, to January 9, 2025. The survey was administered to a nationally representative sample of 1,000 working-age adults with disabilities. Quotas were established based on a representative segmentation of age, region, and gender. Participants were recruited by the panel research company Leger.

The research team conducted, in partnership with Leger, a pre-test of the survey with 30 participants before fielding the survey to ensure its external validity, identifying any language or accessibility issues. After data collection was completed, the overall quality of the responses was analyzed. As a result, responses from 10 participants were excluded and new respondents were recruited to reach the target sample number.

Since the survey was administered by a panel company using a non-random sample, this survey cannot be considered a random probability sample. Therefore, a margin of error cannot be applied to this data set.

All data was analyzed using R and SPSS. Power BI was used to create dashboard visuals. Data analyses included but were not limited to analysis of descriptive statistics and group mean difference testing (e.g., independent samples t-test; ANOVA).

Phase 2

Interview guides

The interview and facilitation guides were developed based on the existing disability studies literature. The final guides can be found by clicking on the below links, which will expire after one year.

1. [Employer guide](#)
2. [Mentor guide](#)
3. [Mentee guide](#)
4. [Roundtable guide](#)

To answer the research questions, the guides focused on understanding:

- the perspectives, experiences, and needs of Canadian workers with disabilities and their employers;
- the development of more effective workplace tools and supports aimed at enhancing employment inclusion for people with disabilities, with an emphasis on mentoring programs;
- perceptions of policies or practices that would enhance workplace inclusivity in Canada; and
- employer insights on organizational diversity-focused mentorship programs, policies, procedures, and best practices.

The guides underwent the research ethics review process. All interviewees and roundtable participants were guaranteed confidentiality.

Qualitative data collection

We conducted interviews with 15 mentors and 15 mentees with disabilities.

Based on the community's composition, this identified list provided sufficient coverage of experiences of mentors and mentees with disabilities in mentorship programs. Mentors were not required to have a disability to participate in this study, while mentees were required to have a disability to participate in this research to capture their lived experience. However, because mentors were recruited from our survey with people with disabilities, most self-reported their disability within the interview.

Mentee and mentor interviews

Within one week of receiving Phase 1 survey data, we created a list of participants who had consented to be contacted for future research. Participants were emailed to schedule virtual interviews with a member of the research team through an Outlook booking link. Consent forms were sent to participants once they had scheduled an interview or expressed interest in providing a written response. Of the 125 approached, 34 accepted invitations to be interviewed. The response rate was 27.2 per cent.

The final sample of 15 mentor and 15 mentee interviews was obtained through turnover, such as interviewee dropouts (n = 3) and exclusion due to inadequate quality data (n = 1). This sample was collected from January 10 to 31, 2025, using Microsoft Teams and Outlook for written responses. One interview was collected on February 13, 2025, due to an earlier dropout. Twelve rounds of follow-up with various sized groups were conducted between January 16 and 28 to recruit women participants and increase the number of participants with experience as a mentor.

The participants were skewed toward men (56.7 per cent), particularly men closer to the retirement age. Women made up a smaller proportion of the overall sample (33.3 per cent) and were younger on average (42.6 versus 50.4 years old). Most participants (48.1 per cent) reported residing in Ontario, followed by British Columbia (25.9 per cent), Alberta (11.1 per cent), Quebec (7.4 per cent), New Brunswick (3.6 per cent), and Nova Scotia (3.7 per cent).

Qualitative analysis

Overall, 424 pages of cleaned transcripts were collected from the interviews with mentors and mentees. The text was coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Coding themes were developed inductively, wherein codes were created as the data was analyzed. Respondents' themes were examined based on how frequently they were noted, as well as the intensity of the observation. Due to the small sample size, we cannot generalize to a wider population of Canadians who experience a disability.

Appendix B

Glossary

Mentoring is defined by the Canadian Association for Supported Employment as a relationship between a mentor and mentee tied to specific context, such as employment or education.¹ This toolkit is designed to support inclusive mentorship within the workplace aimed at enhancing the professional and personal development of both the mentor and the mentee.

Mentors empower and support their mentees by sharing insights, offering guidance, and exchanging knowledge. Our research underscores that mentors act as collaborative partners, helping mentees navigate different aspects of their lives while fostering growth in skills, knowledge, and confidence. Through this collaborative and reciprocal relationship, mentors also gain valuable skills (such as in leadership and communication), broaden their knowledge, and expand their networks.

Mentees engage in mentoring relationships to co-create their journeys with their mentors as partners. As part of shaping their paths, mentees take an active role in discussing and planning their goals in a self-directed way, rather than following the explicit direction of a more experienced individual.²

Workplace mentorship takes place between a mentee and mentor in workplace settings for the purpose of the professional and personal development of the mentee.

Mentoring relationships are continuous, personal, and reciprocal relationships between mentors and mentees.

Self-advocacy is a skill that people with disabilities learn and foster in order to articulate their needs within the workplace.

¹ Canadian Association for Supported Employment and Mentor Canada, *Mentoring for Persons Experiencing Disabilities*.

² Rubbi Nunan, Ebrahim, and Stander, "Mentoring in the Workplace."

Appendix C

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