

Bill Wilkerson

Business Case for Accessibility

The Business Case for Accessibility:

**How Accessibility-Awareness
Strengthens Your Company's Bottom Line**

Bill Wilkerson, Co-Founder and President
Global Business & Economic Roundtable on
Addiction & Mental Health

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About The Author of the Business Case For Accessibility

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M. Wilkerson served as the “transformational president” of Liberty Health and, before that, held senior executive positions over the past 30 years with the Royal Bank, ITT and the CBC.

In the health arena, Mr. Wilkerson is a member of the Corporate Advisory Board for the Harvard Medical School study on depression and productivity. He serves as an adviser to the Rotenberg Chair in Suicide Studies at the University of Toronto and is a member of the Ontario Ministry of Health Task Force on Mental Health Reform.

Over the years, Mr. Wilkerson had tours of duty at every level of government in Canada and was an adjunct professor of journalism at the University of Western Ontario Graduate School of Journalism in the 1970s.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Memorandum:

To: Business Executives and Managers

From: Honourable Michael Wilson, President and CEO Brimson Canada Co.; Tim Price, Chairman Trilon Financial Corporation; Maria Gonzalez, President and CEO Argonauta Strategic Alliances Inc.; Colum Bastable, President and CEO Royal LePage Ltd.

Re: The Business Case for Accessibility

We encourage you – in your own competitive interest – to examine the information in this report. It could make a positive difference to your business.

Consider these themes:

- Persons with disabilities give business a new competitive edge
- Attracting people with disabilities as employees and customers is a win/win strategy
- The business case for accessibility leads to the opportunity to create a business plan for accessibility, which allows companies to capitalize on the productivity and consumer spending power of this segment of the market

Each of these themes is discussed briefly below.

1. A New Competitive Edge

- Business today faces the substantial challenge of recruiting and retaining employees with the skill sets and mindsets needed to compete in the global marketplace
- At the same time, persons with disabilities – representing about one-sixth of all Canadians – have an unheralded but established track record of being reliable, productive employees
- Most live successfully on their own, eat in restaurants, go to movies, use products and services of all kinds and have an influence on a huge secondary market of friends and family in every walk of life
- Persons with disabilities are responsible for an estimated \$25 billion in annual consumer buying power in Canada alone
- They constitute a significant consumer market that can be reached through the principal media plus through channels specifically geared to targeted niches
- For companies that awaken to these facts, people with disabilities are a competitive windfall waiting to happen

2. The Win-Win Strategy

The business case for job and market access for people with disabilities is made here largely through the experience of some of the best-known, most successful and savvy names in business.

The experiences of large corporations such as DuPont and the Royal Bank of Canada show that when business recruits persons with disabilities:

- The pool of potential employees becomes larger
- Staff retention rates increase
- Absenteeism decreases

More than 30 years of internal surveys conducted by DuPont consistently show that people with disabilities who were part of the corporation's labour force:

- Did their jobs well
- Had excellent attendance records
- Were diligent in observing safety standards
- Helped maintain the firm's competitive position

In 10 years, the number of working-age Canadians with some form of disability will increase by 1.4 million according to an analysis by the Royal Bank Financial Group in 2000. Recognition of demographic changes have prompted Royal Bank to state that:

- People with disabilities are a rapidly expanding group of consumers of bank services
- They are as diverse as Canadian society as a whole – they encompass all ages, both sexes, every race and religion, every educational and income level
- In this country alone, persons with disabilities control an estimated \$25 billion in consumer spending

The picture is clear. The business case for accessibility is, in effect, a win/win business strategy. Canadian business can benefit by:

- Tapping into the unheralded, but proven at-work productivity of persons with disabilities
- Capitalizing on the economic power these Canadians wield through direct consumer spending and their influence on the spending decisions of an estimated 12 million to 15 million others

3. A Business Plan For Accessibility

In order to properly tap into this expanding market, business must make changes both in the work place and in the market place.

The Work Place:

- Target hiring people with disabilities as part of the company's recruitment goals
- Promote the recruitment of youth with disabilities through internship programs, mentoring programs and training courses
- Partner with disability organizations to identify barriers to employment for persons with disabilities and to identify job candidates
- Include a section about disability in your company's diversity training for all employees
- Consult Tips from the Front Line, other parts of this report and the Paths to Equal Opportunity web site for valuable advice about conducting job interviews with persons with disabilities
- With correct information, take steps to eliminate the myths that may arise in your firm about accommodating and managing working persons with disabilities

The Market Place:

- Proactively incorporate demographics about people with disabilities into your sales and marketing databases
- Inform your sales and marketing staff that most persons with disabilities don't conform to the shut-in stereotype, but possess buying power plus a desire to grow and learn as consumers and citizens
- Remember this isn't a ghetto market – persons with disabilities have varied and customized tastes like other consumers
- Identify where technological and service innovations will enhance access by customers with disabilities to your firm – and in doing so look for ways to adapt those innovations for the convenience of all your customers
- Determine how information technology can be specifically used to reach consumers with disabilities. The Internet, for example, is a good medium to reach people who aren't extremely mobile – it's relatively inexpensive, offers global coverage and presents information in a variety of formats
- Customize your employee recruitment advertising in media that reach this market, distribute other recruitment advertising to this segment through partners in the disability field, and make job access and consumer spending part of an overall approach to the labour pool and consumer markets defined by people with disabilities

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR ACCESSIBILITY

How accessibility-awareness strengthens your company's bottom line

People with disabilities want to work for you, and they want to buy your products. With skilled and loyal employees at a premium and traditional market growth slowing, can you afford to ignore or stereotype them?

Fortune magazine¹

By Bill Wilkerson

RETHINKING DISABILITIES

The Ontario business sector is working hard at increasing productivity and becoming more competitive in the new global economy. At the same time, people with disabilities are in the midst of a decades-long struggle for inclusion as full members of society.

The aspirations of each group can easily dovetail, if business realizes the untapped economic potential among Canadians with disabilities.

The business sector has the opportunity to adopt a win-win strategy that makes sound economic sense. What it has to do, though, is shift its perceptions and attitudes and embrace the concepts of accommodation and accessibility through universal access and barrier-free design.

For far too many years, people with disabilities have been ignored in the marketplace. Yet this significant segment of the population is made up of many dedicated and talented people with much-needed abilities that have so far been underutilized in the work environment. Additionally, people with disabilities consist of a group that has been neglected by the consumer market, although its purchasing power – and the secondary market that it influences – is large and growing.

Let's look at the employment needs of the marketplace first. There are already critical shortages of workers in specific sectors, and this will intensify in the future. Two recent reports, one by the Vancouver-based Urban Futures Institute² and the other from the Ottawa-based Canadian Council on Social Development³, warn of a broader crisis involving the structure and composition of the labour force in Canada. Both reports predict an impending shortage of workers as Baby Boomers retire.

Another recent report, Tapping the Talents of People with Disabilities declared that even as the Ontario economy grows, "our workforce is aging. As Baby Boomers move through their fifties and begin to retire, the number of young people and immigrants entering the workforce will be insufficient to meet demand. More generalized shortages will occur by mid-to-late decade, particularly in some of Ontario's 'hot spots', as the number of vacancies begins to exceed the number of job seekers.

That means there will be fewer new workforce entrants to help propel business expansion. Employers who recognize the potential of underutilized talent sources will be at an advantage in the race for talent.”⁴

The report you’re reading shows how business can better utilize people with disabilities, both as employees and consumers. It references studies that describe how improving accessibility for people with disabilities also creates new opportunities for businesses to become more profitable and to save money, in both the short- and the long-term.

Another topic that this report deals with is the business case for rethinking how we imagine disabilities. Once we see people with disabilities as unique individuals with varying abilities, who were born with, or acquired functional limitations at some point in their lives, we can begin to properly include them in our economic planning.

Stereotypes, generalizations and labels are seductively easy to use. But they obscure the singular blend of talents, skills and personality traits of each individual. For that reason, people in the business sector must demonstrate the vision to challenge their own assumptions about people with physical, sensory, mental or intellectual disabilities.

The business cases discussed here draw on the persuasive arguments of:

- The Conference Board of Canada
- The Conference Board and CEO Commission On Disability in the United States
- Business executives, retailers, bankers, high technology companies and production firms in Ontario, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and elsewhere

BEST PRACTICES #1

Chapters

Sudbury, Ontario

[A national retail book selling operation]

- Built on two floors connected by a ramp
- All aisles have ample space for wheelchairs
- All washrooms contain wheelchair-sized stalls
- Every Chapters/Indigo store has either a ramp or an elevator, and follows similar floor plans to accommodate customers with disabilities

DEFINING DISABILITY

In 1980, the World Health Organization (WHO) first published its International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps. Since then, it has moved away from a classification system that defined disability as a consequence of disease to one based on “components of health”. The current system recognizes that disability is a function of environmental factors that reflect the context of an individual’s life.

WHO now sees the issue of disability as “a socially created problem” and the full integration of individuals into society, “an attitudinal or ideological” issue.

In Ontario itself, March 2001 saw the release of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC)’s Policy and Guidelines on Disability and the Duty to Accommodate.⁵ This policy notes that the province’s Human Rights Code specifies that people have the right to be free from discrimination due to a “handicap or perceived handicap”, and therefore have the right to equal treatment, which includes expecting accessible workplaces, public transit, health services, restaurants, shops and housing.

The OHRC says disability “includes both present and past conditions, as well as a subjective component, namely, one based on perception of disability.” This includes mental illness, developmental disabilities and learning disabilities. “Even minor illnesses or infirmities can be ‘disabilities’, if a person can show that she was treated unfairly because of the perception of a disability.”

Right now, almost one-third of the complaints received by the OHRC deal with allegations of discrimination against people with disabilities. The largest number is related to employment, followed by problems with services. The OHRC states that: “Voluntary compliance may avoid complaints under the [Ontario Human Rights] Code, as well as save the time and expense needed to defend against them.”

Meanwhile, definitions and attitudes toward disabilities are changing.

Since 1998, the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) of the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services has used the following definition:

“A person has a disability if they have a substantial mental or physical impairment that restricts one or more activity of daily living which includes personal care, functioning in the community, and in the workplace and is expected to last at least one year.”⁶

Nation-wide, the Health and Activity Limitation Survey (HALS)⁷, which was conducted as part of the 1991 census, itemized the following types of disabilities:

- Hearing
- Seeing
- Speaking
- Agility
- Mobility
- Mental/learning
- Unknown physical disabilities – reported physical limitation but no reported difficulty performing specific tasks

Predictions are that people with disabilities will continue to grow in numbers as our population ages.

Using these guidelines as a way to redefine attitudes, this study focuses on opportunities available to the business community to take a broader view of people who have certain limitations. Instead of giving in to the preconceptions and stereotypes, business should rethink its attitudes and look at each person to see his or her potential as a customer or employee.

WHO IS DISABLED?

It's estimated that globally, there are 600 million people with disabilities. At least that's the figure used in 2000 by the Beijing Declaration on the Rights of People with Disabilities in the New Century,⁸ which was signed by a range of non-governmental organizations of and for people with disabilities.

Almost 10 years before, based on HALS and census data, it was estimated that Canada had 4.2 million residents – 16 per cent of the population – with disabilities. Of these, 2.3 million were between the ages of 15 and 64, and 1.2 million over the age of 65. The HALS survey was conducted again in 2001 in conjunction with the national census, but that data is not yet available.

More recently, an analysis published by the Royal Bank of Canada in April 2000 concluded that “As Baby Boomers age, they will spark a 1.4 million increase in the number of working age Canadians with some form of disability by 2010.”

In 1998, the federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for social services released a report entitled *In Unison: A Canadian Approach to Disability Issues*.⁹ This was followed two years later by *In Unison 2000*,¹⁰ which estimated that one in six residents of Canada have a disability. It concluded that people with disabilities “are as diverse as Canadian society as a whole. They are all ages, both sexes, from every race and religion, and from every education and income level.”

Many people who might be considered “disabled” do not perceive themselves in that way. They acknowledge that they have certain limitations on their abilities, but dislike the “disability” label. The degree of social inclusion and participation that people with so-called disabilities can achieve is a large factor in determining how disability affects daily life. This is also shaped by the perspective of others, particularly employers, retailers and service providers.

Collectively, people with disabilities represent massive direct and indirect spending power, even though large subgroups of people with disabilities struggle with poverty because of difficulties finding employment.

That April 2000 analysis by The Royal Bank estimated that persons with disabilities have spending power of about \$175 billion (U.S.) in the United States, with the corresponding figure in Canada about \$25 billion.

DISABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

Independent Not Unemployable

Most persons with disabilities don't consider themselves permanently unemployable. They perceive themselves as independent and want to make the reality of their lives consistent with that vision and sense of identity.

People with disabilities have historically been under-represented in the workforce. The 1991 HALS study, for instance, found that only 56.3 per cent of people with disabilities were part of the Canadian workforce, compared to 80.9 per cent of those who didn't declare that they had a disability.

Because of this, becoming an entrepreneur has become an increasingly viable option for people frustrated by employment barriers, which include simply getting an interview.

"Irrespective of disability, self-employment is becoming more popular as a way of creating employment opportunities in the labour market" pointed out a 1997 article written by Patricia Thornton and Neil Lunt. "Various models are being used by disabled persons. Some individuals are self-employed, either alone or in partnership with one or more others."¹¹

According to the 1991 HALS study, "Twelve point four per cent of working age disabled persons who are working are self-employed. Worker co-operatives have been established in which members (with and without disabilities) make decisions about business operations. Organizations of disabled persons have also formed business subsidiaries which are responsible for creating work for all disabled and non-disabled members."

Significant international research conducted by The Winnipeg-based Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS) has concluded that "there is no reason to assume that an inclination towards entrepreneurship will necessarily be constrained by an impairment."¹²

However, the organization notes that limited business sector understanding of disability, difficulty accessing capital and technology, and a need for positive role models is slowing down acceptance of self-employment by Canadians with disabilities. Still, Canadians already have American models to look to for guidance.

For example, The Centerville, Iowa-based Abilities Fund is dedicated to advancing entrepreneurial opportunities for people with disabilities. It has found that people with disabilities in the U.S. are almost twice as likely as others to be self-employed, that is 14 per cent compared to eight per cent of the broader population. Self-employment and entrepreneurship is also a proven route to social and economic empowerment. For instance, "of more than 150 businesses started by people with disabilities in Iowa's Entrepreneurs with Disabilities Program, more than 90 per cent are successful," the Fund states.

Clearly then, people with disabilities who are capable of owning and running their own businesses also have the ability to work for someone else.

BEST PRACTICES #2

Schukra Manufacturing

Toronto, Ontario

[An award winning furniture designer and manufacturer]

- Hired new employees through LINK-Up Employment Services for Persons with Disabilities
- Two workers who are Deaf have ascended to more responsible positions with no problems
- Minor accommodations were made for employee with post-polio syndrome, resulting in a successful employment match.

BUSINESS CHALLENGES: COSTS, BENEFITS AND BARRIERS

Yet, despite the recognition that there will soon be a critical shortage of dedicated workers in Ontario and Canada, what factors push people with disabilities away from employment for others, be they large corporations or mom-and-pop businesses?

It certainly isn't an avoidance of work. For instance, the 1996 report of the Federal Task Force on Disability Issues, *The Will to Act*¹³ concluded that work "is among the top concerns of Canadians with disabilities."

The report went on to characterize persons with disabilities as "a significant consumer population and labour force" that could be employed by the Canadian private sector. "While there has been an increasing interest in strengthening the relationships between the corporate sector and the disability community, there remain a substantial number of social, economic and systemic barriers preventing many persons with disabilities from fully participating in the Canadian economy. One of the key barriers continues to be negative attitudes towards, and stereotyping of, persons with disabilities."

However *Living with Disability in Canada: An Economic Portrait*, observes that people with certain disabilities are less likely than others to require workplace accommodations. "Having a requirement for special work accommodations certainly reduced labour force participation. Yet only a minority of working-age persons with disabilities actually reported such requirements,"¹⁴ states the document.

But the report notes that "in particular, the attitudes of employers toward certain disabilities may play a large part in the differences in labour force activity of people with different types of disabilities."

The landmark research regarding the performance of people with disabilities in the workforce was conducted by DuPont of Wilmington, Delaware, through in-house surveys in 1958, 1973, 1981 and 1990.

In the 1991 report, *Equal to the Task II: 1990 DuPont survey of employment of people with disabilities*, the corporation reported that "employees with disabilities are equivalent to DuPont's other employees in job performance, attendance and safety."

DuPont also stressed the fact that employees with disabilities help maintain the company's competitive edge. It reported that:

- 55 per cent of its more than 800 workers with disabilities were hourly employees
- 28 per cent were classified as technical and clerical staff
- 17 per cent were in the management and professional category

THE HUGE COST OF WORKPLACE DEPRESSION

Depression, the most common serious mental health problem, is the leading source of worker disability in the world today. Not only does this disability reduce staff functions, so needed in a knowledge-based economy, but its symptoms cost business billions of dollars a year, directly or indirectly.

However, if accurately diagnosed, depression can be treated successfully in three out of four cases through a combination of counseling and medication.

According to the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, North American businesses alone lose about \$60 billion to \$70 billion (U.S.) a year as the result of depressed employees and at least double that when other disorders and addictions are taken into account.

Two-thirds of the dollar cost of depression comes in the form of lost or diminished industrial productivity. Among the workplace shortcomings which can be directly related to depression are excessive short term absenteeism and employees who, create customer service problems, sluggishly collect outstanding receivables, and are less likely to meet sales targets or come up with innovative ideas.

Companies must realize that in the global economy, built on technological change, workers are its most valuable asset. Thus, an investment in workers' mental health, is also an investment in productivity.

The company's 1990 survey of workers with disabilities confirmed that the percentage of those rated average or above was:

- 97 per cent in safety
- 86 per cent in attendance
- 90 per cent in performance of job duties

In this light, the barriers that block employers from access to an important talent pool may be higher than those that keep disabled persons from actively seeking employment opportunities. Thus a considerable number of persons with disabilities drop out or never enter the job market.

A SMART RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

One diversity-based recruitment strategy that has worked for many employers is the job fair. For instance, with an estimated more than 50,000 persons with disabilities looking for work within greater Toronto, jobsMARKET for Persons with disABILITIES was held in March 20001. Corporations such as Alliance Atlantis Communication Inc., Bank of Montreal, CIBC, Hewlett-Packard (Canada) Ltd., McDonald's Corporation, Sears Canada, Purolator Courier Ltd. and Hallmark Canada attended seeking employees to fill a combined total of 1,500 positions. More than 3,000 job seekers also attended. "By learning more about various disabilities and developing a flexible and open attitude, employers can benefit from the enormous talent available," declares Nancy Somerton, Hallmark's manager of Corporate Recruitment and Diversity.

DEALING WITH ACCOMMODATION MYTHS

What is Accommodation?

Despite the myths regarding the cost of accommodation that circulate throughout the business community, the majority of employees with disabilities bring no special accommodation needs to the workplace. Even when they do, the costs are low. For example a study of employer costs done by Cameron Crawford and Tom Martin for Toronto's Roeher Institute in 2000 concluded that "the vast majority of employees with disabilities need no job accommodations." Furthermore, they found that when accommodations were made, the cost ranged from zero "to a high of \$2,365" per person.

Moreover, a Canadian Centre on Disability Studies report noted that "most job-site accommodations cost very little while others are as simple as moving a piece of furniture such as a filing cabinet or desk." Even when factors such as assistive devices and training or retraining, was taken into account, the CCDS found from a survey sent to 20 companies in the manufacturing, communications, transportation, real estate, insurance, consulting, retail, banking, grocery, agriculture and utility sectors that accommodation "cost less than \$10,000."¹⁵

For example, for every category except mobility, less than half the people in the labour force with disabilities other than mobility disabilities required special transportation, modified work hours or job redesign. The two most commonly identified work barriers mentioned by people with disabilities not in the labour force were their need for modified or reduced hours (33.9 per cent) and job redesign (27.7 per cent), both of which are low cost accommodations for employers.

People with disabilities represent a huge business and economic opportunity for Ontario and Canada. Mobilization of this under-used labour force would increase the pool of skilled, semi-skilled and entry-level workers. It would also unleash literally tens of billions of new spending dollars and a consumer group who, by nature, exhibit enduring loyalty in the constructive relationships they build.

"Employers who are willing to give a worker with a disability a chance are tapping into an invisible workforce," the CCDS stated. It added that when employers did hire people with disabilities and made the necessary accommodations, "they found there was little difference between employees with and without disabilities."

Companies that had hired more people with disabilities during the preceding five years told the CCDS, they had:

- Overcome negative stereotypes about people with disabilities
- Understood the idea of a diverse workplace
- Partnered with associations supporting people with disabilities and used them as a source of recruitment
- Advertised on specific Web sites targeted to people with disabilities
- Worked with Workers' Compensation Boards through vocational rehabilitation programs
- Made their entryways more accessible

WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATION: A BEST CASE SCENARIO

A senior marketing representative for a pharmaceutical company in a Toronto suburb, Harry Smith (not his real name) contracted a neurological disorder that slowed down his mobility, but not in his cognitive capabilities.

Confident of his skills and experience, the firm, Mr. Smith and his insurance company developed strategies to adjust his responsibilities, but still allow him to work for the firm.

These included:

- Establishing wheelchair access to the company premises
- Giving him a preferred parking space close to the main building
- Retrofitting his office with a space for his wheelchair plus a computer portal for a laptop computer with a large screen
- Flexible working hours
- Elimination of the global travel function as part of his job
- Linking his home computer to the firm's main server through the Internet, allowing him to work at home if necessary

Watson Wyatt Canadian Research and Information Centre, Toronto

EMPLOYMENT TIPS FROM THE FRONT LINE

Georgina Kostal describes the key to her early success at the RBC Royal as her "aptitude for multi-tasking" – which she describes as matter of "pure common sense."

As a bank manager for many years, in cities and towns across Ontario, her successful 30-year career at the Royal Bank has not been slowed down by her cerebral palsy.

Why Accommodate?

The simplest answer to the question is enlightened self-interest. In an environment characterized by intense competition in an increasingly global marketplace, the business sector in Canada and in Ontario must compete for human, as well as financial capital.

With one out of every six people in Canada experiencing some form of disability, that's a large potential group of unemployed or underemployed people who, in massive numbers, want to work and have the motivation and skills to do so. This "untapped" pool of workers represents a distinctly competitive cost advantage to employers at a time when labour shortages are increasing.

The Baby Boom generation will reach the official retirement age of 65 in just over 10 years. An article in Canadian HR Reporter noted: "Looking ahead five years, however, 83 per cent of respondents said hiring qualified people will be a problem."¹⁶ The article, which surveyed human resources managers and directors, as well as other executives and compensation specialists, stressed that few companies have developed plans for meeting this shortfall.

Furthermore, the annual Angus Reid poll of Canadian CEOs indicated that 61 per cent found it difficult to find workers with the necessary skills. They said attracting and retaining employees is the top priority for business today.

Moreover, one 2000 survey by Toronto-based Watson Wyatt Canadian Research and Information Centre of 1,600 employees found that commitment of Canadian employees to their employers has dropped to the lowest level in a decade. Another survey by the same firm found that because of this lack of commitment, absenteeism and employee disability management costs have risen from 5.6 per cent of payroll costs in 1997 to 7.1 per cent in 2000.

As this situation of rising costs and lessened employee commitment intensifies, it's causing concern among employers and economists.

Now contrast this concern with data gathered by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), based at West Virginia University in Morgantown, West Virginia. JAN has found that that accommodating employees with disabilities yields an average return of \$28.69 in benefits for every dollar invested in the accommodation. This documented record of persons with disabilities in the workplace makes a compelling argument for accessibility.

But there is an even more compelling dimension to ensuring that persons with disabilities have access to both consumer choice and employment in the normal course of business. That dimension relates directly to their growing numbers – and their desire, expectation and right – to participate fully in the economy, the community and the workplace:

Accommodation can reduce wage replacement costs, absenteeism, overtime and employee turnover rates as well as expanding the talent pool. This is especially important among smaller, retail businesses where cash flow sustains the business.

Since her condition has begun to affect her health more, she now has a job dealing directly with customers. She still uses her comprehensive knowledge of the bank's electronic network, and her substantial management experience. She works more flexible hours, and sometimes works at home from a fully operational office, which was converted from a bedroom with the help of her employer.

"This is working well for me and the bank and more importantly, the customers seem content," she notes.

Royal Bank has realized that making a few accommodations for a valuable employee like Ms. Kostal is an investment in the key customer group she services on its behalf.

As someone who has managed her health as a special challenge for most of her life, and who has extensive management experience, Ms. Kostal is in a unique position to offer helpful tips for employees and employers who face similar situations.

Here they are.

For employees:

1) *Anticipate Others' Perceptions*

People with health problems and disabilities need to be realistic and clear about their relevant competencies and what others may perceive their limitations to be. Address those misplaced perceptions not on a personal level, but as a learning experience. The person opposite you may simply not have the experience or information to know better.

2) *Sell the Skills You've Developed*

Job applicants often have skills in very special areas. Talk about the skills you have. Talk about your ability to persevere and overcome obstacles. These are valuable skills in the workplace.

In the United States, for instance, Pizza Hut found that employees with disabilities had a retention rate 22 per cent higher than their able bodied counterparts. The company also found that because one in 10 of its customers had a family member with a disability, the act of employing more disabled workers improved sales and customer loyalty.

Not only that, but by tapping into this segment of the labour force, business managers and owners are also reflecting or creating a work environment at ease with diversity and non-discriminatory practices, and following the laws of Ontario and Canada. Stressing prevention, rather than cure, this situation can also avert costly personnel disputes, human rights violations or complaints, as well as financial payouts. Right now, about one-third of the complaints before the Ontario Human Rights Commission are disability related.

An April 2000 analysis by the Royal Bank of Canada notes that corporations risk tarnishing their reputations if they're known to have underestimated the needs and interests of people with mental or physical disabilities. More seriously, as noted earlier, costly legal settlements are on the rise for companies and governments convicted of discriminatory workplace practices.

For employers:

1) See The Individual Not the Disability
Human resource managers – and other managers who hire staff – must get over the fear of interviewing or hiring a person with a disability. These executives should use behavioral interviewing techniques to see past the limitations represented by the disability. Ask the person: “Do you see yourself being able to perform the majority of the functions involved in this job?” Then make a decision based on the individual’s qualifications.

2) Focus on Ability Not Disability
The important thing about interviewing job candidates with disabilities is to focus on the person’s ability. Everyone but everyone has limitations of one kind or another. A person doesn’t have to be disabled to have limitations.

3) Accommodations Need Not Be Major
Some employers perceive workplace accommodations to be major, but they don’t need to be. Accommodation specialists can help employees understand how the job needs to be done and what tools are needed to do it. Mostly, accommodation turns out to be a combination of flexibility about hours, location, and technology.

4) Don’t Force Things
Make adjustments and accommodations but don’t create a job to fit the individual. That’s not good business. And it usually doesn’t work.

5) Make Everyone Meet The Same Standards
Persons with disabilities must meet performance standards like everyone else. The process of communicating with that person, documenting the conversation and taking steps to help remedy the problem is the same as it is for any other employee.

MANAGING DISABILITY AT WORK - THE SMART WAY

Cost and Accommodation

In considering the value of accommodating persons with disabilities, Lisa Bendall, managing editor of Toronto-based Abilities magazine suggests that “instead of focusing on the disability and what the employee can’t do, employers need to focus on the ability of the person and what he can do. Then discuss with the individual what accommodations would be necessary.”

As we’ve seen before, in most cases accommodations that need to be made for people with disabilities are mostly minor and inexpensive. “Whenever employers think there’s a large cost involved they are usually wrong,” she adds. Accommodation is often something as simple as putting a desk up on blocks of wood to accommodate a wheelchair.

Notes Evelyn Gold, director of Programs and Services for the Toronto-based Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work: “Accommodations can be creative instead of costly. Just because somebody with a wheelchair is coming into the office doesn’t mean all of the furniture has to be taken out. Just look at the space rather than tearing down the walls.”

Universal Access and Barrier-Free Design

In a July 2001 article in Construction Canada, architect Pamela Cluff observed that seniors and people with disabilities — two increasingly overlapping groups — taken together, “will represent between 20 to 25 per cent of the recreation, retail, entertainment, workplace and housing marketplaces in the next 10 years and beyond.”¹⁷

While accommodating these groups is key for any forward-looking enterprise, she estimates that doing so will only add about five per cent to the construction budget and much, much less if accessible design is included as part of the plans and overall design of any new construction project. Even if a proper business plan for accessibility isn’t developed at the beginning the price of retrofitting a commercial or retail space will still be only about:

- \$800 to \$1,000 per linear foot to construct ramps
- \$3,500 to \$4,000 each for automatic door openers
- \$7,000 to \$8,000 for an accessible unisex public washroom
- \$6,000 to \$7,000 to provide wiring and hearing-assisted devices for the average conference room

That means universal design considerations are moving into the foreground. Corporate and commercial enterprises and the three levels of government are increasingly looking at accessibility, both for employees and for potential customers, she adds. The banking sector in particular has taken an interest in people with disabilities as an underserved segment of the population. Universal Design is the idea of creating products and working environments that can be used or experienced by everyone, without special adaptations.

BEST PRACTICES #3

Rick Hansen Secondary School
Mississauga, Ontario

[An educational institution designed to be accessible for persons with disabilities]

- Named for the former Canadian wheelchair athlete
- A 17,000-square-metre school, opened in 1999, it is designed to be fully accessible to students with disabilities
- Accommodations include doors, furniture and push-button drinking fountains for students with disabilities
- Special pathways marked on the floor exist for with students with visual impairments

BEST PRACTICES #4

Canada’s Wonderland
Maple, Ontario

[A large amusement park and concert facility]

- Full wheelchair access throughout the park
- Park maps show grade, so customers can take the elevation of different paths into account when planning routes
- A special guide to the park for people with disabilities is available, offering detailed descriptions of attractions, restaurants and rides as well as any restriction related to specific impairments

According to North Carolina State University's Center for Universal Design, workspace and furniture fit these criteria if:

- 1) They're both useful for and marketable to people with different abilities
- 2) They're flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of preferences and aptitudes
- 3) They're simple enough to use no matter the user's experience, knowledge, language skills or concentration level
- 4) They provide the user with enough information to easily operate them
- 5) They minimize any hazards that could arise from use
- 6) They can be used comfortably and efficiently without causing fatigue
- 7) They're properly sized so they're operational by anyone, no matter his or her size, posture, or method of mobility

Technology and Accommodation

One area where businesses are making accommodations for people with disabilities is in the field of information technology. Companies are starting to gear their products towards consumers with disabilities, a concept that has a long history in itself.

Both the typewriter and the telephone were based on efforts to overcome limitations for people with disabilities. Alexander Graham Bell's mother and wife were both Deaf, and that contributed to his fascination with the electronic transmission of speech and the invention of the telephone. Not only that, but the first commercially successful typewriter, the Malling Hansen Writing Ball, produced in 1870 in Denmark, was initially designed to allow blind people to write.

Today, new information and communications technologies can level the playing field for people with certain disabilities and ensure they're included in the information- and knowledge-based economy along with everyone else.

Use of electronic and information technology (E&IT) coupled with the expectations of people who use it, shouldn't reinforce patterns of exclusion and isolation among people with disabilities, notes The Accessible Future, a June, 2001 report by the National Council on Disability (NCD).

Partnership between business, government and consumers to address gaps in access is necessary, says the NCD because "the marketplace is not well suited to redressing the E&IT access gap on its own. Normal competitive pressures do not operate to encourage fully accessible design of mainstream E&IT products, although the latent demand for such devices is considerable."

Still, some corporations are already dealing with this growing market as well as unintended discrimination. Cellular telephones, for instance, created barriers to telecommunications access for people with hearing impairments because of a failure to incorporate hearing aid compatibility. However an article in the Wall Street Journal has noted that Nokia has developed phones that flash or vibrate, as well as a "loopset", or microphone on a wire that plugs into a hearing aid.¹⁸

In 1998, Microsoft Corp. established an Accessibility and Disabilities Group to ensure that its products met the diverse needs of consumers with disabilities. Elsewhere, there has been increased sensitivity to create accessible web design for the Internet.

Some organizations have even been established specifically to develop and support technology for people with disabilities. Two prominent examples are:

- The Vancouver-based Neil Squire Foundation is an internationally acclaimed non-profit organization, with a staff of 50 and offices in four provinces, including Ontario. It has developed innovative programs and services and some of the world's leading edge adaptive technology for people with physical disabilities including the sip'n'puff switch, a breath operated switch that enables people with severe disabilities to operate computers.¹⁹
- The University of Toronto Adaptive Technology Resource Centre (ATRC) is a world leader in developing technologies to meet the challenges faced by people with disabilities. One of its aims is to have persons with disabilities acquire the same familiarity with computers, the Internet and specific technology as people who are able bodied. ATRC works directly with technology manufacturers and developers to help create products and systems that are commercial, attractive effective, and universally accessible. It also provides information on equal access to information technology through training workshops and on its web site to educators, students, the media and the general public.²⁰

INCREASE YOUR BOTTOM LINE: TAP INTO EXPANDED CONSUMER MARKETS

One Canadian in six has a disability of some sort. That's a significant portion of the consumer market. Yet not enough businesses accommodate the spectrum of people with disabilities by making their environment more customer-friendly. Thus they lose potential revenue. Collectively, people with disabilities represent massive direct and indirect spending power.

As the Bank of Montreal's Task Force on Employment of People with Disabilities noted in 1992: "People with disabilities are a rapidly expanding group of consumers of bank services. Our population is growing older and disabilities, most of which are acquired long after birth, tend to increase with age."²¹

As people age, they are increasingly susceptible to visible and invisible age-related impairments, limitations and disabilities. A recent article in The Toronto Star cited figures from American Express indicating that "there are over 50 million North Americans with classifiable disabilities," and about 12 million of them travel.²²

The article went on to note that there has been a "tremendous increase" in vacation cruises by people in wheelchairs, accompanied by increased accommodation by cruise lines, which go out of their way to welcome travellers with special needs. Among the accommodations are ramps, automatic doors, staterooms with wider doors, lower windows for better viewing, and wheelchair-accessible showers.²³

Demographics and immigration changed the fabric of the North American population following the Second World War. At the same time, growing recognition of human and civil rights, changing social values, and a demand by minorities for inclusion – including communities of people with various disabilities – have all contributed to changing attitudes toward diversity.

Collectively, aging Baby Boomers have significant financial assets. For example, according to American demographics cited in a Fortune magazine article, the 25 per cent of Americans over the age of 50 "control one-half of the nation's buying power and three-fourths of its assets, representing \$150 billion in annual discretionary income, and billions more for necessities like housing and food."²⁴

In the face of globalization and unforgiving competition, the business sector has increasingly realized the value of social marketing, recognizing that customers are more likely to support companies perceived as good corporate citizens, as well as those sensitive to the individual's specific needs.

Firms have increasingly fostered ongoing relationships with customers and potential customers in an effort to build visibility and develop loyalty. Both these factors have implications when applied to people with disabilities. In Canada, their buying power is now estimated to be about \$25 billion, and they also influence the spending decisions of friends and families – and in doing so, at least double their economic reach.

BEST PRACTICES #5

Granite Brewery

Toronto, Ontario
[A brew pub and restaurant]

- Menus in Braille are available
- A carpeted area provides a quiet conversation niche for people with a hearing loss
- There's complete access to the pub from street level and with its wide front doors
- All washrooms are wheelchair-accessible
- Adequate space exists between tables to accommodate wheelchairs
- Staff is trained to provide customer service for people with disabilities

BEST PRACTICES #6

The Body Shop

55 Outlets in Ontario
[A skin and hair care product emporium]

- All Body Shops are wheelchair-accessible
- Interior design has been planned so that the space between counters is sufficient for proper movement of wheelchairs or scooters
- All washrooms accommodate wheelchairs

Therefore marketing strategies aimed specifically at persons with disabilities make compelling sense. Fortune magazine noted the growing presence of people with disabilities in television commercials going back to 1986, when McDonalds aired one with two teens talking about Big Macs in sign language. The American National Captioning Institute research indicated that 57 per cent of people with a hearing-impairment said they were more likely to buy a product advertised in a captioned commercial. Meanwhile in the state of Florida alone, the spending of people with disabilities spins off more than \$100 million of economic activity in the U.S. and creates 1,500 jobs a year.

As we've already noted, architect Pamela Cluff sees seniors and people with disabilities representing 20 to 25 per cent of the Canadian recreation, retail, entertainment, workplace and housing marketplaces in the next 10 years and beyond. Meanwhile an analysis done in 2000 by the Royal Bank of Canada stated that "as Baby Boomers age they will spark a 1.4 million increase in the number of working age Canadians with some form of disability by 2010".

SERVING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

The Anne Johnston Health Station Toronto, Ontario

Located in a neighbourhood with a highest concentration of senior citizens in the city, in 2000 this clinic decided to make its facilities even more welcoming to people with disabilities. Because of its service to seniors, the Station had an acute awareness of disability issues. Recognizing that no other nearby facility serviced that growing population, it, with a grant from the Ministry of Citizenship, conducted accessibility audits of local businesses to create a directory of barrier-free services. Today the approximately 350 local residents with disabilities it serves are also able to take advantage of other, appropriate local services.

MARKETING TO CONSUMERS WITH DISABILITIES

Unfortunately, Canada lags behind the United States in recognizing the market of people with disabilities. However, The California-based Business Leadership Network (BLN) in the U.S. has not only recognized the economic potential of people with disabilities as consumers, it has undertaken initiatives to change perceptions of people with disabilities. American Census data says that approximately one American in five has a disability. The BLN stresses that this group controls \$175 billion in discretionary income, because people with disabilities buy much more than just wheelchairs or other products related to their disability.

Similarly, Canadian organizations such as the Canadian Standards Association (CSA), the Ontario Restaurant Hotel and Motel Association and the Greater Toronto Hotel Association (GTHA) have already recognized that they're missing a huge source of revenue by ignoring people with disabilities. Right now, the CSA is in the midst of developing new standards for services.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Citizenship the GTHA and Ontario March of Dimes have created a manual that provides training for front line staff in hotels and restaurants how best to serve people with disabilities.²⁵ Tourism Toronto, which markets the city of Toronto as a destination for tourists, conventions and business has made the need for universal access one of its key messages. Recently the agency commended the general manager of the Hilton Toronto Hotel for her using the new manual to ensure her staff offers excellent customer service to guests with disabilities.

The Fortune article cites data from Simmons Market Research Bureau indicating that of the people with disabilities:

- 48 per cent are principal shoppers for their household
- 46 per cent are married
- 77 per cent have no children – increasing their disposable income
- 58 per cent own their own homes

REACHING THE PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES MARKET

- Remember, you're dealing with Canadians who overall have billions of dollars to spend
- Know they make up about one-sixth of Canada's population and live with, work with, and influence a sizeable portion of the remaining five-sixths.
- Appreciate that they make up 16 per cent of Canada's consumer buying power
- Recognize that this isn't a ghetto market, but a large part of the mainstream marketplace enriched – in terms of customized interests – by people who deal with their disability
- Research this market as you would any other group you're targeting.
- Recall that people with disabilities are naturally diverse and can judge their needs the same way as any other group, so don't make assumptions
- Understand you have to earn acceptance and customer loyalty from them just as you do with any other group
- Include feedback from persons with disabilities who can be a natural test market for all kinds of innovative consumer products and services
- Don't concede this major market group to your competitors

HOW TO CREATE A BUSINESS PLAN FOR ACCESSIBILITY

We've seen that Canadians with disabilities possess largely untapped economic power. So it's up to you as businesspeople to tap into this market. Businesses that begin dealing with that expanding power base will improve their bottom lines while embracing the concepts of accessibility and accommodation. Accommodation in the workplace is a much less costly process than many firms imagine, as we've already noted, and doing so can pay off economically. Still, the first step in creating a business or service oriented towards people with disabilities is to put a plan into action.

Each plan should include the following elements:

1) A Statement of Leadership.

Create a policy statement or simple message from the CEO or the owner of the business to let all managers, employees and customers know that the organization will look everywhere for the best people and the most loyal customers, including persons with disabilities. This statement will galvanize the business to ensure that this 16 per cent of the population is on the organization's radar screen and legitimately part of its plans for growth and competitive success.

2) New Workplace Strategies

Evolve recruitment strategies to tap into the potential of job candidates among persons with disabilities. They include:

- Partnering with agencies and community organizations to help identify appropriate candidates, attract them and recruit them
- Participating in job fairs
- Training human resources and other managers to conduct job interviews with persons with disabilities to get past the myths or fears they may have about recruiting or hiring someone under these circumstances. Focus on the job's essential functions, the qualifications of the individual, and ways to make reasonable accommodations
- Educating managers and employees to dispel the myths of working with persons with disabilities and destroy the stereotypical "cost of accommodation" myth
- Introducing disability-related concerns to the company's Employee Assistance Plan

3) Market Planning

Generate or access market survey data in order to strategically reap a share of the estimated \$25 billion in direct buying power that flows from Canadians with disabilities. Create an economic profile of persons with disabilities to nail down their buying habits and procedures as well as those of the sizeable secondary market of families and friends they influence or bring with them.

4) Service Strategies

Discuss how you can adjust your services and business locations to interest this market. Companies with expansion plans should take the necessary steps to make those adjustments when least expensive – at the design stage.

5) Innovation Strategies

Benefit from the product and service innovations you introduce for employees or customers with disabilities, as other customers will welcome these innovations as well.

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