

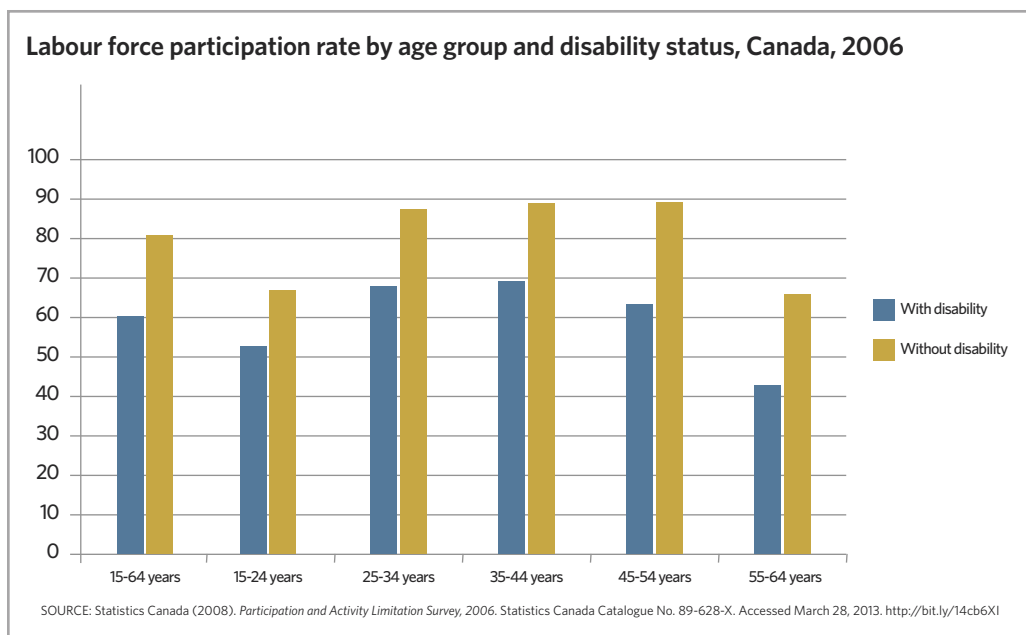
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Disability and Employment in Canada

BY NATHAN BATTAMS



Disability affects over a billion people worldwide – about 15% of the global population – and disability rates are expected to grow within most industrialized nations as a result of population aging and a greater understanding about health issues.¹ Canada is no exception: in 2006, the disability rate in Canada was 17%, up from 15% in 2001.² People living with a disability have unique and often challenging experiences accessing and participating in the paid labour force.

According to an OECD study, the employment rate for people who live with a disability was just over half the rate for those who do not (44% and 75%, respectively).³ In Canada, for people aged 15-64 who reported living with a disability in 2006, more than 4 in 10 were neither in the labour force nor looking for

work.⁴ Employment rates for those with a disability were lower among women (46%) than men (56%).⁵ Those who reported living with a disability tended to work less than those who did not – 15 weeks less per year among men, and 12 weeks less among women.⁶

Not surprisingly, the difference in labour force attachment between Canadians with disabilities and Canadians without disabilities often results in an income gap, with the difference in earnings increasing with the duration of the disability period. The income gap was nearly zero for disability periods of one year, but it climbed to at least 20% for those who reported a disability period of six years, according to a 2009 StatsCan report.⁷

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The relationship between disability and employment is complex. Unemployment rates differ according to the type of disability reported – for example, the unemployment rate for people reporting a hearing disability was 10% in 2006, compared with 16% for people reporting a memory-related disability.⁸

While the majority of disabilities are related to pain, mobility and agility, there are a growing number of disability claims related to mental health. Mental health conditions account for an estimated 30% of short- and long-term disability claims in Canada.⁹

People living with disabilities often face barriers to employment as a result of social stigma, rather than the condition itself. The experience of stigma is pronounced: the majority (55%) of surveyed Canadians reporting a disability feel that “a person is more likely to be hired or promoted if they hide their disability.”¹⁰

Employers may make assumptions and voice concerns about the working capacity and performance of a person with a disability – however, 8 in 10 surveyed small business owners in Canada who have hired people with disabilities say that these employees have either “met or exceeded” their expectations.¹¹ Some employers worry about the potential costs of accommodation: in a 2013 survey, respondents

provided a mean estimate of \$10,000 for accommodation costs – 20 times the actual average cost of \$500 (which is not an issue for the 20% of employees living with a disability who require no accommodation whatsoever).¹²

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Today, more employers are actively recruiting and hiring persons living with disabilities, as their capacity for support full participation in the labour force becomes increasingly clear. Managers, coworkers and unions can create cultures of inclusion where people living with a disability can reach their full potential and contribute to the success of their organization. But support does not just come from the workplace: Canadians living with disabilities also rely on family members for assistance, emotional support and encouragement. The multifaceted nature of disability means that colleagues, caregivers, policymakers and families need to work together with Canadians living with disabilities to foster participation in the social and economic lives of the communities in which they live.

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¹ World Health Organization (2013). “Disability: Report by the Secretariat,” from *Sixty-Sixth World Health Assembly* (Provisional Agenda Item 13.5). Accessed May 20, 2013. http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA66/A66_12-en.pdf

² MacKenzie, Andrew, Hurst, Matt and Crompton, Susan. “Living with Disability Series: Defining Disability in the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey,” in *Canadian Social Trends* (Winter 2012). Statistics Canada Catalogue No. 11-008-XWE. Accessed March 27, 2013. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2009002/article/11024-eng.htm>

³ WHO, 2013.

⁴ Galarneau, Diane and Radulescu, Marian. “Employment Among the Disabled,” in *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (May 2009). Accessed April 2, 2013. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/2009105/article/10865-eng.htm>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Statistics Canada (2006). “Labour Force Participation and Unemployment Rates by Disability Type,” (Table 1) from *Participation and Activity Limitation Survey*, 2006. Accessed April 2, 2013. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-628-x/2008007/t/5201154-eng.htm>

⁹ Sairanen, S., Matzanke, D., & Smeall, D. (2011). “The Business Case: Collaborating to Help Employees Maintain their Mental Well-Being,” in *Healthcare Papers* (11). Accessed May 20, 2013. <http://bit.ly/18Bni2o>

¹⁰ Pollara Strategic Insights. *Canadians Believe People with Disabilities Are Victims of Hiring Bias* (survey, conducted August 24-30, 2012). Accessed April 4, 2013. <http://bit.ly/Qf8Vbw>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

