



**Breaking Down Barriers to Employment: Developing comprehensive and practical resources to increase employer awareness and access to the labour force for people living with episodic disabilities**

Summary Report

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Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation (CWGHR)

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The **Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation** (CWGHR) is a national charitable organization working to improve the quality of life of people living with HIV/AIDS through rehabilitation research, education, and cross-sector partnerships. CWGHR members are individuals and organizations that have an interest in HIV, disability and rehabilitation. These include: community-based HIV/AIDS, disability and rehabilitation organizations; national professional associations; unions; government agencies; private-sector companies; people living with HIV; health care, social care and human resources professionals; and other people who are interested in HIV and rehabilitation.

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# Summary Report

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE CURRENT CONTEXT

Due to a range of developments such as medical advances and technical supports, many people with episodic disabilities<sup>1</sup> are living longer, healthier lives and additionally with greater capacity to participate in employment. In contrast, according to the report *Disabling Poverty and Enabling Citizenship: Understanding the Poverty and Exclusion of Canadians with Disabilities* researched and written by Cameron Crawford for the Community–University Research Alliance between the Council of Canadians with Disabilities and the University of Victoria:

- Canadians with disabilities have persistently remained much less likely to be employed than people without disabilities. According to Statistics Canada, 51.3% of working-age persons with disabilities were employed in 2006 compared with 75.1% of their counterparts without disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2008a)
- Working-age people with a disability are about twice as likely as those without to be living on a low income<sup>2</sup>

This research reports high levels of unemployment for people living with disabilities. Although these statistics refer to people with disabilities in general, the figures are relevant to workplace participation for people living with more ‘traditional’ disabilities and those living with ‘episodic’ disabilities. While there may be similarities with the overall challenges among people living with disabilities to access the labour force, there are differences in the types of employment barriers faced by people living with episodic disabilities in relation to people with more ‘traditional’ forms of disability.

‘Episodic disabilities’ is a term used to describe conditions such as multiple sclerosis, HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C, some forms of mental illness, cancers and arthritis. Features that distinguish episodic disabilities from ‘traditional’ disabilities are their unpredictability, and alternating episodes and degrees of illness and wellness, both of which can force people out of the workforce without warning and then resolve, to once again allow people to return to work.

Many people living with episodic disabilities in Canada have described serious barriers in accessing and/or maintaining employment. As access to employment is a key determinant of health<sup>3</sup>, quality of life can be reduced or limited if these barriers cannot be overcome. Access to stable employment is not only a social determinant of health but also a basic human right. The issues or barriers identified by people living with episodic disabilities, researchers and supporters, include: lack of understanding and awareness among employers; lack of awareness/ability of people living with episodic disabilities to ensure their rights are upheld; lack of training for human resources practitioners and co-workers; stigma, discrimination; lack of accommodation or access; impacts of unpredictable health; and employer and government policy and program barriers.

### ***Gaps in Available Employment Supports***

Barriers to accessing employment for people living with episodic disabilities still remain.

Questions remain on:

- What strategies need to be employed to hire and retain employees with episodic disabilities?
- What employers and human resources practitioners should know about developing accommodation plans for employees with episodic disabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Episodic disabilities are lifelong and chronic conditions such as HIV, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, diabetes and some forms of cancer and mental illness. People living with episodic disabilities may experience periods of good health that may be unpredictably interrupted by periods of illness or disability. Resulting consequences can force people out of the labour force without warning for indeterminate lengths of time. This in turn, can have significant impacts on health and income stability.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.ccdonline.ca/en/socialpolicy/poverty-citizenship/understanding-poverty-exclusion>

<sup>3</sup> Social determinants of health include factors such as income security, housing, access to appropriate employment, health care, education, nutrition/food security, psychosocial support, gender, social safety net, social inclusion  
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/oi-ar/index-eng.php>

- What can be done to effectively foster a workplace culture that is inclusive of employees with episodic disabilities?

In order to address these challenges CWGHR received funding from the Opportunities Fund in November 2010 to address the information and learning needs of employers including human resources practitioners and managers and to promote access to employment for people living with episodic disabilities.

## **2. OBJECTIVES OF THE BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT PROJECT**

The objectives of the Breaking Down Barriers to Employment project were to:

- Increase the awareness and understanding of employers (e.g. human resources practitioners and managers) on episodic disabilities and employment related issues
- Increase awareness and capacity of employers (e.g. human resources practitioners and managers) to address the challenges facing people living with episodic disabilities in the workplace
- Increase capacity of employers (e.g. human resources practitioners and managers) to employ strategies to enhance opportunities for someone with an episodic disability to be/stay engaged in the labour force

## **3. KEY PROJECT ACTIVITIES**

The following project activities were conducted as part of the Breaking Down Barriers to Employment project:

- Developed an interactive and accessible on line course *Managing Episodic Disabilities: Employment Accommodation Best Practices* (hereafter referred to as *the course*)
- Reviewed, piloted and integrated changes to *the course* based on feedback from human resources practitioners
- Developed and implemented a promotional strategy and related materials to promote *the course*
- Held consultations/meetings (in-person and via teleconference) with employers and episodic disability organizations on the issues facing people living with episodic disabilities in the workplace and to raise awareness about *the course*
- Developed knowledge-based print resources on: episodic disabilities and employment, integrated workplace legislation and accommodation practices for employers including human resources practitioners as a supplement to *the course* and catalogued and uploaded resources developed to the CWGHR website, the Episodic Disability Employment Network website, and the Episodic Disability Resource Centre website

## **4. PROJECT OUTCOMES**

The project had the following outcomes:

- Increased knowledge and awareness of employers (including: human resources practitioners and managers) regarding episodic disabilities and the implications related to employment
- Increased capacity of employers (including: human resources practitioners and managers) to support employees living with episodic disabilities

## **5. PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS**

- The project consisted of three main activities: the preparations for and development of *the course* in an online format; the development of information sheets for employers on various

topics related to episodic disabilities and employment and participation in meetings to move forward towards improved access to employment for people living with episodic disabilities.

- The text version of *the online course* was reviewed and edited by an e-learning consultant who adapted the text version into a series of PowerPoint slides to show how *the course* would look online. The PowerPoint slides included suggestions on how to make *the course* interactive and on how to improve knowledge retention through the use of learning objectives in each module, interactive games (e.g. quizzes using fill-in the blank and multiple choice formats, summaries of each module and bibliographies at the end of each module). For example, one interactive exercise displayed a series of boxes on the left side of a 'teeter-totter'. When each box is clicked, a myth related to disability would appear on screen. The myth would disappear after a period of time and a fact would replace the myth on the screen. The box would then move from the left side of the 'teeter-totter' to the right side. This process continues until each of the myths is replaced by a fact and each of the boxes is moved to the right side of the screen.
- Once the text version of *the online course* was completed, one module of *the course* was uploaded. Selected portions of this online module were reviewed by an online disability accessibility consultant who provided an audit report on the findings of the review. The purpose of the disability accessibility review was to determine if *the online course* was accessible to those with a variety of disabilities including visual, auditory and learning disabilities. Based on the outcomes of the audit, changes were made to *the course* to enhance access to *the course* for those with a variety of disabilities.
- While the final stages of *the course* were being developed online, the recruitment for the piloting began with Human Resources Professionals in the greater Toronto area. Participants were recruited via a volunteer listserv of the Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA). When the recruitment began for the pilot participants, more than 150 inquires were received looking for additional information on the pilot. Interested applicants were invited to submit a resume for review by CWGHR. More than 115 resumes in total were received.
- A group of 28 pilot participants were selected. These pilot participants were selected based on:
  - Years of experience in human resources (HR)
  - Areas of specialization in HR
  - Industrial sectors
  - Experience with developing online courses
  - For-profit, public and not-for-profit industries
- Several pilot participants were also selected based on their French language fluency and their experience in HR in other countries.
- An in-person orientation session was held with the pilot participants to learn about the lived experiences of people who are working and living with episodic disabilities. The speakers at the orientation session included a senior executive at Scotiabank living with mental illness and a case worker from the AIDS Committee of Toronto who is living with HIV. Each shared their personal story of the challenges they have faced with maintaining employment and the strategies that helped them overcome these challenges.
- Pilot participants then had four weeks to review the course and to provide feedback via an online survey on their feedback on the course in the following areas:
  - Content
  - Functionality
  - Usability

- Appearance
- Each pilot participant was also part of one of four focus groups. The focus groups provided an opportunity for participants to expand on the answers given in the online survey and to provide any additional feedback not discussed in the online survey.
- Lessons learned over the course of the piloting included:
  - The need for a diverse group of participants for the pilot focus groups, based on factors such as years of experience, industrial sector, gender, having worked outside of Canada as an HR professional.
  - The need for a variety of ways to review course content, including: interactive activities, plain course summaries, audio and video presentations, quizzes and thought questions.
  - HR practitioners are one of several groups that require training on the topic of episodic disabilities and employment. Other key target audiences are senior executives and front-line managers who work directly with staff living with episodic disabilities to implement accommodation plans.
- In addition, during the course of the project, three information sheets for employers on topics related to episodic disabilities and employment were developed and translated. The information sheets were made available to employers via the CWGHR listserv, posting to the CWGHR website and by distribution at presentations and conferences. Topics for the information sheets included:
  - Communicating about episodic disabilities in the workplace
  - Episodic disabilities and insurance
  - Leading practices in accommodating employees living with episodic disabilities in the workplace
- In addition, meetings were held with episodic disabilities organizations and policy makers to discuss the employment barriers and challenges facing people living with episodic disabilities and highlight options, such as the new Managing Episodic Disabilities: Employment Accommodations Best Practices course, to address these employment challenges in the workplace.

## 6. EVALUATION

Evaluation was an integral part of the project. Several forms of evaluation were used including process and summative evaluations of *the course*.

The types of evaluations included:

1. Pre/post self assessment survey completed by pilot participants
2. Piloting session evaluation forms
3. Feedback on information sheet resources developed for employers, human resources practitioners and managers

All piloting participants submitted evaluations of *the course*. Evaluation results from *the course* piloting included the following participant reports that pilot participants either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the following after reviewing *the online course*. The following reflects the responses of 21 of the total pilot group of 28 participants.

- 90.5% reported “I like the way *the course* was designed”
- 90.5% reported “*the course* held my attention”
- 100% reported “the content made sense to me”
- 100% reported “learning objectives for each module were clearly outlined”
- 100% reported “the case studies that were presented were relevant”
- 90.5% reported “*the course* provided a good overview of episodic disabilities in the workplace”
- 90.5% reported “*the course* presented a good overview of current legislation on workplace policies, procedures and practices”
- 85.7% reported “*the course* clearly presented best practices “to assist in the management of employees living with episodic disabilities”
- 90.4% reported “*the course* described practical applications of best practices to accommodate employees living with episodic disabilities”
- 85.7% reported “*the course* clearly presented best practices to assist in the management of employees living with episodic disabilities”
- 85.7% reported “*the course* presented practical information on how to develop a supportive and inclusive workplace culture”
- 90.5% reported “the way the content was presented in *the course* facilitated my learning”
- 90.5% reported “I would recommend this *course* to my human resources professional colleagues”

Additional feedback/recommendations from the pilot participants from the focus groups included:

- The development of a student workbook to facilitate additional reflection and consideration of the topics discussed in *the course* including: organizational assessments, reflective questions, module summaries, and quizzes
- Adding additional case studies for more applied learning
- Developing a mechanism for students to connect with one another both during *the course* and afterwards to ask questions of one another and share best practices

The following are several quotes from pilot participants following the completion of the pilot:

- “It was a pleasure to participate in the pilot.”
- “I really enjoyed it and see it as an excellent training design and subject matter.”
- “I would be honoured to stay involved with this....let me know what comes up that I could become part of.”
- “I would like to remain connected to CWGHR. Thank you very much and I look forward to working with you again!”

Overall the course and the information sheets were very well received. Employers and human resources practitioners are expressing significant interest in the topic of episodic disabilities in the workplace as little information was available previously related to the topic and this has been a particularly challenging area for employers in the past.

## 7. NEXT STEPS

Next steps for the project include incorporating the feedback from the piloting process. The final course product will be translated into French and disseminated broadly through provincial human resources associations across Canada.

Discussions are underway with the Canadian Council of Human Resources Associations (CCHRA) the national association which oversees the credentialing of Human Resources Professionals across Canada

and works with associations in the provinces to ensure that appropriate trainings are delivered. CCHRA will be endorsing *the course* to all of the provincial associations and encouraging them to disseminate marketing information on *the course*.

HRPA will be providing technical software support with the development of an online community forum for HR practitioners interested in the topic of episodic disabilities and employment to allow them to connect with one another during and after the course to ask questions, share best practices and share resource information related to episodic disabilities and employment.

Based on the outcomes of the piloting, interest was expressed in developing training materials for front-line managers on episodic disabilities and employment. CWGHR is examining options to develop this training to meet the specific needs of front-line managers.

Interest was also expressed by pilot participants in the development of a course for human resources practitioners interested in policy reform to improve workplace and public policies related to episodic disabilities and employment. CWGHR is examining options to develop this third course in the Managing Episodic Disabilities series.