



Budget 2013 includes support for integrating persons with disabilities into the labour force, and they will increasingly have the satisfaction and pride of contributing to the economy. Shutterstock photo.

Enabling the Workplace: Enhancing Integration for Persons with Disabilities

David Nicholas, Margaret Clarke and Herb Emery

The Harper government's 2013 budget includes an unprecedented level of support for the integration of persons with disabilities into Canadian workplaces. While the level of commitment at the federal level is new, existing research, particularly on the employability of individuals with autism spectrum disorder, indicates the budget measures are an investment in the right direction for persons with disabilities, job creators and the country as a whole.

There are five sections of the 2013 federal budget that aim to enhance employability and workplace integration for persons with disabilities, including skills training, enhanced opportunities and workplace accessibility. But the changes will require concerted follow-up across both jurisdictional boundaries and a range of outcomes for employees, employers and government support networks.

The 2013 *Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector Report* from the Panel on La-

Identified Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM)
Network 2000-2008
Combining Data from All Sites

Surveillance Year	Birth Year	Number Of ADDM Sites Reporting	Prevalence Per 1,000 Children (Range)	This is About 1 In X Children...
2000	1992	6	6.7 (4.5-9.9)	1 in 150
2002	1994	14	6.6 (3.3-10.6)	1 in 150
2004	1996	8	8.0 (4.6-9.8)	1 in 125
2006	1998	11	9.0 (4.2-12.1)	1 in 110
2008	2000	14	11.3 (4.8-31.2)	1 in 88

bour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities presents compelling reasons to create new employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in Canada.

Current employment rates among persons with neuro-developmental disabilities – 1 in 6 Canadians – are inadequate; as an example, employment for persons with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) ranges in studies from 10 to 55 percent. In a recent study of a Canadian cohort, some young adults with ASD with average to above average intellectual skills simultaneously exhibited substantial challenges in adaptive and workplace functioning. Many of these challenges, however, could be addressed by modifying the workplace environment, ensuring support, and fostering understanding among employers and the broader community. Sufficient employment supports that mitigate employment challenges can lead to stable and positive vocational and income outcomes for the individual with ASD and enhanced human resources for the economy. This potential to increase labour supply in the Canadian labour market is substantial given that the childhood diagnosis rate of ASD has been identified at one in 88 persons.

Finding pathways to inclusion and workplace productivity appears integral to individual and family quality of life, effective community partnerships, organizational productivity, and, ultimately, the strength of the nation. Like typical Canadians, persons with disabilities keenly desire to contribute via vocational activity and to derive benefits from meaningful work.

The net present value at birth of the incremental costs of supporting the ASD population over its neurotypical peers in Canada can be estimated to be \$3.4 billion for each annual birth cohort.

Supporting persons with disabilities to find and succeed at work is estimated to yield a wide variety of social and economic benefits, but requires an investment in terms of elements such as employment readiness and sustainability (e.g., training, job coaching, employer support, etc.). These costs can be considerable. Based on a 2006 US study by M.L. Ganz, the net present value at birth of the incremental costs of supporting the ASD population over its neurotypical peers in Canada can be estimated to be \$3.4 billion for each annual birth cohort.

Considering the cost savings and the productivity gain from additional workers in the marketplace, the benefits of employment for persons with disabilities are substantial. Moreover, emerging anecdotal accounts of the effectiveness and commitment of persons with disabilities in employment invite further analysis of hypothesized benefits of heightened productivity and employee retention. From both economic and societal perspectives, considerable benefits thus emerge related to employing this group of currently un- and under-employed persons. The *Rethinking Disability in the Private Sec-*

tor Report from the persons with disabilities panel highlighted promising practices and government action to build on their success. Increasingly, examples suggest that hiring people with disabilities is good business, but the scale on which this hiring can occur will depend on increasing training and opportunities for persons with disabilities, including ASD.

An additional benefit of supporting employment and increased independence for individuals with disabilities is a potential reduction of burden placed on Canadian families. In a recent study by Zuleyha Cidav and colleagues, average earnings in families with children with ASD, for instance, are 28 percent lower than in families whose children do not have health limitations and 21 percent less than families with children with other health limitations.

In their 2007 report, *Pay Now or Pay Later: Autism Families in Crisis*, the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology indicated it had heard from parents and advocacy groups about the tremendous emotional stresses and financial challenges faced by families with a child with ASD. The Senate committee was told that families must substantially attend to the needs of their loved one with ASD. For example, one stay-at-home parent is often required to provide comfort, consistency, support and intervention. Accordingly, beyond benefits of employment for persons with disabilities and society as a whole, benefits to families and communities also emerge. Conversely, quality of life among persons with disabilities and their families may spiral downward from a lack of employment or other meaningful vocational activity, with potentially deleterious impacts for the individual, family and community.

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There are five significant areas of the 2013 federal budget that will address labour market enhancement for persons with disabilities.

1. Reforming Labour Market Agreements

The federal government has committed \$222 million to support skills training, including for persons with disabilities.

2. Strengthening Federal Programming for Persons with Disabilities

The Opportunities Fund, which was due to end, will continue in its present form and as of 2015-16, will grow to \$40 million per year. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) will be integral in the development of a national employment model for persons with disabilities that can be supported out of the Opportunities Fund. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) will be given \$7 million per year starting immediately to support research in labour market participation for persons with disabilities. Also, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) will be allocated an additional \$15 million, which will be committed to strategic patient-oriented research (SPOR) networks.

3. Creation of the Canadian Employers Disability Forum

The government has allotted \$2 million to support the Canadian Employers Disability Forum. This group will offer leadership in employer training and awareness to create a permanent community of employers who will strengthen their workforce by including persons with disabilities.

4. Extending the Accessibility Fund

This fund was allotted \$15 million per year to support “workplace accommodations” including training and infrastructure assistance for persons with disabilities with accessibility needs. This could entail physical disability accommodations such as ramps, or accommodations related to other types of disability such as, in the case of ASD, accommodation for sensory issues such as white noise or sound clouds.

5. Canada Job Grant Program

The Canada Job Grant is anticipated to assist in skill development through potentially matching dollars of \$5,000 each (federal government, province and employer). This will enhance job skill training and opportunity for persons with disabilities, but requires employer and provincial engagement.

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The federal government is demonstrating strong national leadership in addressing labour force gains in Canada that are anticipated as a result of greater inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workforce. There is a growing awareness that employing a diverse workforce can be a major factor in organizational productivity and success. Studies from DuPont indicate that disabled workers performed comparable to or better than non-disabled peers with regard to safety, attendance and job performance. The Labour Market Panel found that turnover, absenteeism, and tardiness drop appreciably in organizations with disabled workers. Moreover, customers view organizations that hire people with disabilities favorably and likely prefer to patronize organizations that employ a diverse workforce even if it means switching companies or brands. Accordingly, various metrics increasingly favor the inclusion of a diverse workforce; however, finding effective ways to engage and support this workforce are critical to widespread engagement of persons with disabilities in the Canadian labour market.

These are promising days as we move forward in seeking increased labour force participation among persons with disabilities. To that end, we propose the following:

1. We need to proactively support individuals with disabilities, their families and employers in this transition to increased employment, engagement and stability.
2. Evidence-informed models are needed to ensure optimal vocational

support services. A better understanding about outcomes and how salient processes foster or conversely impede successful vocational outcomes are important for policy and resource development.

3. Greater clarity may be needed in the administration and priority setting of budget allocations. As an example, how are persons with disabilities defined in terms of service eligibility across provinces and territories? Federally mandated support for services and outcome targets will have to be clearly delineated at the outset of reforming labour market agreements and other matching programs.
4. Understanding the influence of the federal government on provincially mandated programs is important yet jurisdictionally complex. Greater clarity in program development, delivery and markers for evaluation are needed.
5. Proactive change invites multiple levels of development including opportunities and supports to individuals and families, labour market shifts, and the development of more accepting social values and attitudes regarding diversity. Engagement at municipal, provincial and federal levels is crucial in large scale change that is ultimately meaningfully and broadly realized within Canadian communities.

A final thought. The cost of labour market training programs for persons with disabilities is modest compared to the economic and human return on investment. Persons with disabilities in the labour force contribute to the economy, and have the pride and satisfaction of knowing it. For their families, of the one in 88 Canadian children on the ASD spectrum, for example, just being a priority in the federal budget is a major and highly positive development.

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