



Persons with vision loss in the workplace



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Introduction

The strength of a company is characterized, among others, by the quality of its people, their persistence, passion and devotion. Never underestimate the value of a proactive, reliable and determined staff since the company's success depends on it.

To have excellent employees, we must be able to recruit them outside the traditional pool of potential candidates. Diversity is a compelling factor in organizational effectiveness, especially because of demographic pressures that are arising presently. Indeed, a dazzling number of baby boomers approach the age of retirement and we are facing a shortage of young people available to replace them.

Thus, we realize that the recruitment of competent and qualified persons is essential for entrepreneurial success. The inclusion of people with disabilities in the labor force is therefore a particularly interesting solution. These candidates are often sidelined by employers who tend to be fooled by the myths that surrounds them. Indeed, it is often said that this group of individuals, when integrated into a company, generates exorbitant costs in terms of accommodations, in addition to being difficult to dismiss if they fail to meet the objectives of their position. This is a myth! And therefore, this guide aims to lower the barrier of prejudice that people with disabilities face on a daily basis.

Specifically, it will examine the relevance of integrating persons with vision loss in the labor force. Often employers are unaware of how this group of individuals can produce benefits for their organization in its entirety.

This guide will aim to demystify misconceptions maintained in respect to this group, with the help of many studies carried out on the subject. This document will draw a general picture of the process of inclusion of these workers in the workplace by looking at themes such as communication, the accommodations, the challenges and the benefits of hiring them.

1. Vision Loss

1.1. Definition

In Canada, the term vision loss refers to all forms of visual impairments that may affect the daily life of a person, from partial to total vision loss (blindness). Blindness is the type of visual disability that is usually the best known and refers to people who are blind. It is also possible that a person is considered legally blind, meaning it has a visual acuity of 20/200 or less or a visual field of less than 20 degrees in the dominant eye. We can refer to these persons as people with partial vision loss (CNIB, n.d.).

Vision loss is a disability that can affect different components of vision such visual acuity, visual field, depth perception and contrast sensitivity. Note that 75% of cases of vision loss can be treated or prevented, and therefore, are not necessarily permanent (CNIB, n.d.).

1.2. Causes

There are multiple causes of vision loss. The list below shows the main causes, and a brief description of each.

1. **Macular degeneration (AMD):** The most common cause of vision loss in Canada, where more than 1.4 million people are affected (CNIB, n.d.). AMD is a degenerative disease that affects the macula, a part of the eye near the center of the retina that is responsible for color perception and part of the central field of view (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006a). AMD causes a gradual loss of central vision (Job Accommodation Network, 2013). Early detection helps in reducing progression and damage (Guide Dogs Australia NSW / ACT, 2013). AMD is usually the result of the normal aging process of an individual and primarily affects his ability to read (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006a).
2. **Glaucoma:** It is characterized mainly by a pressure in the eye that damages the optic nerve and optic disc, thus affecting the peripheral vision (Job Accommodation Network, 2013). Glaucoma is considered to be a major cause of blindness. It causes a condition commonly known as tunnel vision, where an individual loses his peripheral vision, but retains his central vision. To avoid permanent damage, glaucoma should be detected and treated as early as possible (Guide Dogs Australia NSW / ACT, 2013).
3. **Cataracts:** Cataracts affects the lens, a part of the eye controlling the entry of light rays. When a cataract develops, the lens becomes increasingly opaque, preventing light from entering the eye (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006a). Cataract affects both the central and peripheral visions (Guide Dogs Australia NSW / ACT, 2013). The treatment is to completely remove the cloudy lens surgically and replace it with an artificial lens (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006). When untreated, cataracts can lead to total vision loss (Guide Dogs Australia NSW / ACT, 2013).
4. **Diabetic retinopathy:** It mainly affects the blood vessels of nerve cells and fibers of the retina, as well as being - as the name suggests - directly connected to diabetes. Diabetic retinopathy weakens the blood vessels, which may result in partial or complete vision loss (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006a).
5. **Refractive errors:** The refractive errors affect mainly the retina. These common disorders rarely cause serious complications and are usually settled through glasses, contact lenses or laser surgery. The common symptoms are blurred vision, headaches and eyestrain. If there are complications or if they are untreated, refractive errors can cause vision loss (National Eye Institute, 2010). There are four main forms of refractory disorders:
 - a) **Myopia:** Myopia is a refractive error that affects distance vision. The person still manages to see near objects (National Eye Institute, 2010).
 - b) **Hyperopia:** People with this problem usually have good distance vision but their near vision is blurred. In more severe cases, close and distant visions are affected (National Eye Institute, 2010).

- c) **Astigmatism:** Astigmatism is characterized by a defect in the cornea (irregular curvature) affecting both distance and near blurred visions (Job Accommodation Network, 2013).
- d) **Presbyopia:** This refractive error is directly related to age and affects most adults as they age. This is a progressive degeneration of the lens that affects the ability to focus on objects that are close (National Eye Institute, 2010).

6. Retinitis pigmentosa: Eye degenerative disease that primarily affects the photoreceptors (rods and cones) present in the retina. This disease occurs mainly in early adulthood. Retinitis pigmentosa causes a progressive loss of night vision and peripheral vision, ultimately leading to tunnel vision. While developing, the disease can affect the central vision and cause blindness. Unfortunately, there is currently no effective treatment against retinitis pigmentosa (Job Accommodation Network, 2013; CNIB, 2004).

Besides those mentioned, there are several other causes of vision loss, such as accidents, contact with chemicals, diseases (tumors, cancers, etc.), complications during childbirth and infections (trachoma , onchocerciasis, etc.) (Australian government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008; United States National Library of Medicine, 2014; World health Organization, 2015; public health Agency of Canada, 2011).

1.3. Statistics

In 2013, there are over half a million Canadians with some form of vision loss, of which about 87 000 are blind or considered legally blind. In New Brunswick, this number is estimated at about 10 000 people. Approximately 5 million Canadians demonstrate warning signs that could result in vision loss in the near future. With the aging population and knowing that vision loss is often associated with age, it is expected that the number of Canadians living with vision loss is likely to increase by about 30% in the coming decades (CNIB, n.d.).

In Canada, 22% of individuals with a vision loss have a severe vision loss. Note that 58% of people living with some form of vision loss are women, and 42% of men. However there is no significant distinction in degrees of severity in both sexes (Statistics Canada 2009).

Among people of working age (15 to 64), only a third of persons with vision loss are present in the labor market. This clearly demonstrates that this group forms a significant untapped labor force by employers. Of these, about half have an annual salary of \$ 20,000 (CNIB, n.d.), even if more than 40% of them hold a post-secondary degree (Statistics Canada, 2009).

2. Challenges

Individuals with vision loss face many challenges in the workplace. Among these, discrimination is one of the most frequently encountered barriers. Despite the obvious progress made in recent decades, there are still prejudices against this group. Among others, it is often incorrectly believed that these individuals cannot occupy positions or perform the required tasks since they cannot see.

Only 20% of people with some vision loss are blind or declared legally blind (Statistics Canada 2009). Consequently, most persons with vision loss are able to see and function effectively in the position they occupy (Beaudin, 2011). It is also noted that about 90% of legally blind people have sufficient vision to work without the need for major accommodations. As for the other 10%, they are much less difficult to accommodate than you think, since they have often developed strategies to fully go about their daily activities (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008).

However, misconceptions still deeply rooted in our society are such that a high proportion of persons with vision loss are still unemployed and tend to have considerable challenges in integrating into the work team (CNIB, n.d.).

Some obstacles are directly related to the disability. These challenges vary with each case as different types of vision loss exist and different degrees of severity are associated with them. Still, different types of vision loss often have similarities, and therefore similar challenges. In fact, many persons with vision loss can have difficulties seeing in certain directions as well as perceiving distances and depths. People with a loss of central vision often have difficulty reading or seeing faces clearly. For individuals with a loss of peripheral vision, the main challenge is mobility. For many individuals, these challenges become more serious over time, since some types of vision loss - macular degeneration, retinitis pigmentosa and refractive errors - worsen with aging (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, almost half of Canadian workers who have some form of vision loss work occupy jobs with wages of \$ 20,000 or less annually. Thus, one of the major challenges is to access high-paying jobs that match their skill levels and expertise. Among the frequently encountered obstacles, we have limited working hours (part-time), the physical working environment, prejudice and lack of accommodations (Statistics Canada 2009).

Persons with vision loss are able to take full advantage of technological tools available to them. Moreover, 75% of them are able to properly use a computer. However we note that 30% say that the lack of appropriate software and accompanying tools represent considerable challenges for them in their work environment (Statistics Canada, 2009; Beaudin, 2011).

Getting to work is particularly challenging for persons with vision loss. Among others, 21% of these individuals have said they could not use a car to get to work, and 43% and 21% of them claim not to use respectively taxi or bus for reasons of logistics or accessibility (Statistics Canada 2009).

3. Benefits

As mentioned in the Business Case on hiring people with disabilities, recruiting and retaining this pool of candidates can generate numerous business advantages. Persons with vision loss are no exception to the rule. Their integration within a team can be greatly beneficial to the company, other employees and also to customers. So as a reminder, here they are:

- 1. A new workforce:** In a labor market in constant evolution, employers must face the lack of skilled labor available (Buccigrossi, Pfeffer and Robinson, 2003), the aging population and the growing number of young workers leaving the province to work elsewhere in Canada (Martel, Caron-Malenfant, Morency, Lebel, Bélanger and Bastien, 2012). Employers can meet this challenge by turning to diversity and inclusion, including the hiring of persons with vision loss. There are about 60,000 people with disabilities of working age (15 to 64) in the province and people living with vision loss account for approximately 10 000 of these (Government of New Brunswick: Department of post-secondary education, Training and Labour, 2013; CNIB, n.d.).
- 2. The cost of accommodations:** Employers are often concerned about the accommodations and mainly by their costs. However, studies show that their cost is relatively low, generally between 0 and \$ 600. This amount is very little when we know that the employee can bring in terms of profits. The accommodations usually increase the productivity and efficiency of both the employee and the organization. Note that the majority of workers with disabilities do not need accommodation (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013).
- 3. Health and safety costs:** Employers tend to believe that people with disabilities generate exorbitant costs of health and safety. However, studies show that the costs are similar for employees with disabilities. This group has no more accidents than other staff members and no more recourse to compensation for accidents at work. So there is no link between disability and the costs related to health and safety in the workplace (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013).
- 4. Legal costs:** These refer to the potential costs arising from legal conflicts between the individual and his employer, which may occur as a result of a lack of accessibility, accommodations or human rights violation. Again, studies have shown that there is no more incidence of legal conflict with a person with disabilities compared to another employee (The Conference Board of Canada, 2013).
- 5. Performance and Productivity:** Performance and productivity are among the skills particularly sought by employers. People with disabilities do not necessarily perform better in terms of production and performance, but they are equal to others. If well integrated into the labor force, they can work at the same speed and become reliable and competent employees contributing fully to the success of an organization (Work Without Limits, n.d.; Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.; Government of Canada: human resources and skills Development Canada, 2013).

6. **Absenteeism and safety:** Studies by DuPont and DePaul University reveal that people with disabilities have excellent attendance rate. In addition, they work safely and are not hurt more often than other staff members (Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons, n.d.; Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).
7. **Staff turnover:** Turnover and employee retention are issues on which employers must seriously pay attention. When an employer manages to retain its employees, it can save considerable sums in recruitment, orientation and in several other spheres of its activities (The Conference Board of Canada, 2001). People with disabilities generally keep their jobs longer than other employees (Deloitte, 2010; Government of Canada Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013).
8. **Innovation and adaptability:** Because they are constantly finding different and creative ways to go about their daily activities, people with disabilities enable an organization to achieve considerable progress in innovation. People with disabilities can help promote openness, change and progress, bringing new ways of thinking, innovative perspectives and more creativity in the work force. A competitive organization in terms of innovation and capacity to evolve manages to better serve its customers by offering better products or services.
9. **The impact on all staff:** A diverse group can promote different viewpoints and influence the entire staff to be creative and innovative. The arrival persons with disabilities in the workplace contributes to makes all staff more open to changes. Their integration into a team greatly improves morale and employee satisfaction, teamwork and motivation of the group (North East Community Partners for Inclusion, 2005).
10. **Public image and reputation:** The inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce can greatly improve the public image and reputation of an organization. When hiring an individual with a disability, a company demonstrates that it is open to diversity. A company oriented towards inclusion can reach a diverse and intelligent customer base. Employers can raise the goodwill of their business, as well as its image. Moreover, the hiring of people with disabilities promotes universal access, which can be profitable for other employees as well as customers.
11. **Purchasing power:** In Canada, people with disabilities represent approximately 13.4% of the population, and have a potential purchasing power of over \$ 25 billion. Including this group in the workforce is therefore good for the economy. In addition, people with disabilities can have a great influence on their families for their choices as customers. Promoting inclusion makes it possible to reach people with disabilities and their families, making them loyal consumers (The Conference Board of Canada, 2001).
12. **Human Rights:** For some respecting values such as equality, diversity and inclusion are valid reasons for hiring people with disabilities. Recruitment of these and other minority groups demonstrates that employers promote non-discriminatory practices and they convey values based on human rights.

4. Communication

Communication with persons with vision loss can seem intimidating for some employers. Although there are specific items to discuss with them, the ways of interacting are essentially the same as with any other employee. This section therefore aims to develop a list of different strategies to ensure good communication.

Tips for Communicating with persons with vision loss:

- When referring to persons with vision loss, you can use the term person with vision loss, person who is visually impaired, person with impaired vision and person who is blind or legally blind. (Community Foundations of Canada: HR Council, n.d.). We must prioritize the person, not the disability.
- Act like you do with any other person. Among others, in an interview, shake his hand, ask him the same questions and use the same procedures (Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).
- Make sure all important documents are available in different formats (Braille, screen reading software, large print, etc.). This includes application forms or tests during the selection as well as other important documents related to the work of the person (Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.; Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008).
- When approaching a person with vision loss, it is advisable to talk to her so she knows you are there (Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).
- Indicate who you are when you are beginning a conversation, so that the person may be able to recognize who she is communicating with (Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).
- Talk as you normally do and do not be embarrassed if you use popular expressions like "See you later" or "you hear what I'm saying? ". These people know these terms and will not be offended by them (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008).
- In a group conversation, it is very important to identify yourself clearly when you speak and indicate which person you are talking to (Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).
- Do not touch or distract a guide dog without first asking the permission of the owner (Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).
- Let the person know when you leave a room or a conversation (Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).

- You can offer to the person to be the guide, but you should wait for the permission to do so. When this is the case, let the person hold your arm and control its own movements (Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).
- Be sure to describe as accurately as possible the physical environment when giving directions. Remember that these people cannot see what may seem obvious and trivial to you. It is recommended to inform the person when you approach doors and stairs (Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).
- Encourage all staff to use these communication strategies (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008).
- Stay calm and relax! To communicate with this individual is much less complicated than you think! If you have questions or do not know how to properly communicate, feel free to ask the person and it will be of great help (Creative Workforce Solutions, n.d.).

5. Accommodations

Persons with vision loss can usually perform the same tasks and occupy the same positions as other workers. Besides, they are found in almost all sectors and types of employment. However, it may be that they have a need for some accommodations in order to work to their maximum potential (Royal National Institute of Blind People, 2013).

Where adaptation measures are deemed necessary, the process starts. Having identified the challenges, the employer may create a list of options. Then the most relevant strategies are tested in order to eventually set up the most efficient (Job Accommodation Network, 2013).

Moreover, the accommodation process is only effective when both parties are actively involved, namely the employer and the person who requires an accommodation. In this context, it is important to regularly consult the employee requiring the accommodation (Job Accommodation Network, 2013).

The accommodation process does not stop after an adaptation measure is put in place. Indeed, the employer must ensure they have the employee's feedback to see if the accommodation is still effective. The reevaluation of an accommodation is a crucial component that allows both parties to ensure the success of the process (Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters, n.d.).

Many adaptation measures exist to help persons with vision loss to perform in their work environment. The lists below show four major categories of adaptation measures (Statistics Canada, 2009; American Foundation for the Blind, 2015; Project Aspiro, n.d.; Job Accommodation Network, 2013; Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008)

1. The position and duties:

- Modifications and flexibility in the work schedule
- Part-time work
- Redistribution of tasks and changes to the job description
- Breaks to reduce eyestrain
- Overtime for orientation periods
- Flexibility in deadlines

* Note that about 40% of accommodations for persons with vision loss are part of this category. Moreover, 23% of these people only need to change and flexibility in working hours and 15% of them only require a redistribution of tasks or change in the duties of the position to fulfil its requirements ... which is free (Statistics Canada, 2009)!

2. The resources, technology and tools:

- Large Print
- Magnification tools (magnifiers, CCTVs, etc.)
- Documents in Braille
- Messages by voice mail, phone or monitor (to replace text messages)
- Text to speech conversion software
- Screen magnification software (the software can change colors, mouse and multiple components of the interface of a computer to make them more accessible)
- Braille translation software (this software convert format documents like Word or HTML Braille)
- Braille printer or embosser
- Screen reader software (ex. JAWS)
- Audio version of documents, books, etc.
- Digital recorders for note taking
- Abacus
- Talking cash registers
- Talking Calculators
- Headsets
- Audio dictionaries
- Bank and currency notes recognition device
- Speaking watches or clocks
- Talking scales
- Cell Phones
- Closed circuit TV system

- Flexible document holder or lectern (these tools can bring documents closer without having to bend or stretch constantly in order to read)
- Telephones with large digits
- Speaking tape measure and other electronic construction tools

* Note that the lumbar support and hearing aids represent 21% of accommodations used by persons with vision loss.

3. The physical environment:

- Changing the brightness and lighting in a room
- Relocation of the workstation
- Textured Edges on the steps of a staircase
- Auditory signals to accompany visual signals
- Removing Barriers (keeping the working environment in good order and especially and circulation and traffic areas)

4. Transportation:

- Access to public transport services
- Access to taxis
- Sharing a car with a work colleague

Overall, these accommodations all have as main objective to enable the person with vision loss to work to its full potential. Adaptation measures allow employees to be more efficient, productive and satisfied, which in turn is a direct benefit to a company.

Conclusion

Individuals with vision loss are employees like any other, with strengths and weaknesses of their own. If well integrated, they have as much chance of success as the rest of the team. All you have to do is establish the strategies and / or appropriate accommodations, and to establish a trusting relationship where the employee and the employer can effectively communicate and feel at ease.

Many employers fear hiring persons with disabilities, fearing that they are costlier than beneficial ... which often leads to the exclusion of candidates immediately after the disclosure. However, this is a myth! In many cases, the individual already has his personal accommodations in his possession or none are required at all. If the implementation of adaptation measures is required, it is important not to worry. Often, they are not so expensive or even free (eg. A mobile app, changes in working hours, etc.), in addition to allows the employee to maximize



the extent of its competencies.

It is essential to learn to better understand the different disorders, and see beyond them. Undoubtedly, people with disabilities actively contribute to the success of a business.

If hiring a person with vision loss is of interest to you, if you have any unanswered questions or if you just want to chat with a member of NBESS, do not hesitate to contact us!

We will be happy to assist you in this process, and consequently, to see your business flourish.

New Brunswick Employer Support Services

For more information, you can contact New Brunswick Employer Support Services (NBESS). The NBESS offers free services to employers through consultations, presentations and training.

New Brunswick Employer Support Services

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