



# Creating Welcoming Workplaces

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*Employers participating in the 2024 THRC pilots of new tools can also refer to their [resource list](#) and are welcome to contact their designated advisor for consultation and guidance.*

## CREATING WELCOMING WORKPLACES

Every employee wants to show up to their job and feel that they and their work are valued. Employees who do not feel they are supported by their systems, their managers, and/or their colleagues are less likely to perform to the best of their abilities and less likely to stay with their employer.

Employees with disabilities can face specific challenges in this regard. Many have made ongoing efforts to manage their disability so that they can meet their job demands and their employer's expectations. With those personal investments in mind, a perceived lack of support from the company can feel especially disappointing.

Employees with disabilities who feel well-supported and enabled in their role are likely to become even more invested in their job and their workplace community. More generally, a welcoming and supportive work environment creates a positive feedback loop for all employees.

### The Physical Workplace – Keeping Accessibility in Mind

The first step to creating a physically inclusive workplace involves thoughtful workplace design that accommodates the needs of people with disabilities, both visible and non-visible.

#### Non-visible Disabilities

Some disabilities, especially those which require the use of an assistive device such as a wheelchair, walking stick, etc. are more obvious and can be easily seen by others. Other disabilities like mental health disorders or autoimmune diseases are not obviously identifiable just by looking at someone. These disabilities are just as worthy of inclusion in conversations surrounding accessibility. For more information on non-visible disabilities, see THRC's Tool on [Invisible Disabilities](#).

Some accessibility considerations such as accessible ramps, washrooms, parking spaces, emergency exits, and websites are required by many provincial accessibility standards acts<sup>1</sup> and constitute the “bare minimum”. Other considerations, such as ergonomic furniture, accessible technology, and easily accessible information posted within the workplace, can signal to an employee with a disability that their workplace is committed to accessibility and inclusion.

For employees with invisible disabilities such as visual or hearing impairment, it can be equally important to focus on the inclusive design of the digital workplace (along with any written materials posted in the workplace). For example:

- Text should be large (or zoomable) and have high contrast to its background.
- Website formats should be responsive to various screen sizes and devices.
- Videos posted to websites should enable captions or transcripts

<sup>1</sup> [Legislation in Canada – Accessibility Services Canada \(accessibilitycanada.ca\)](#)

For more information on building a safe and accessible physical workplace, please see the THRC tool: [Supporting Safety of Employees with Disabilities](#).

### Methods for Evaluating Workplace Culture

The second component of a welcoming workplace is the culture itself. Do employees feel safe to disclose their disability to their employer? Is accommodation easy to request? Do coworkers take the time to understand the needs of a team member with a disclosed disability?

In order to create a more welcoming workplace, it's important to first determine the current climate around disability within your organization. Some methods for this include:

- **Conducting an employment systems review (ESR):** An ESR is a comprehensive evaluation of your company's employment practices and policies. The goal is to assess how well these systems support fair, effective, and efficient hiring, compensation, performance management, and other aspects of employment, including workplace culture. Review HR documents and speak to staff to determine if there are specific barriers for employees with disabilities that are unintentionally embedded in existing workplace policies and practices. Look at the THRC tools and other online resources for ideas about common barriers and some better practices.
- **Tracking retention of persons with disabilities** within your workforce. This could include:
  - Looking at exit interviews for clues about your organization's climate around disability. Do employees with disabilities mention a lack of benefits or lack of career development opportunities? Do they cite a toxic work environment?
  - If your organization tracks disability data for employees, determining if they are leaving the organization at inflated rates.
  - Checking if employees with disabilities are referring others to job opportunities within your company.
- **Employee engagement / "pulse check" surveys:** Along with assessing employee satisfaction generally, employee engagement surveys can be used to ask questions related to disability. The following questions could be asked on a rating scale, as some examples:
  - "When I show up to work, I face challenges due to a disability that my coworkers may not experience."
  - "If I needed a workplace accommodation, I would know who to talk to about requesting one."
  - "I feel like a valued and respected member of my work team."
    - The results of this question could then be broken down and compared by respondents who do or do not self-identify as having any disabilities.
- **Employee resource groups (ERGs):** ERGs provide a feedback mechanism for groups of employees to make their voices heard and affirm their individual experiences. An ERG focused on employees with disabilities can hold discussions about the barriers and challenges that they face and report these experiences back to leadership. They can also help to acknowledge and celebrate those practices that are working well.
  - In smaller organizations where a dedicated ERG may not be appropriate, it can be more useful to have informal mechanisms to discuss disability, such as "lunch and learns".

- In ERGs, it is important to strike a balance between enabling employees with disabilities to give input and suggestions for how the organization can improve while also ensuring that they do not feel they are being unfairly burdened with additional responsibilities because of their identity.
- ERGs can also be used as resources for allies. Often, hiring a person with a disability can be encouraging for those who have a person with a disability in their family, network, or community. This can help foster empathy and community within the workplace.
- You can find useful tips for creating ERGs on the THRC website: [DEI Diversity Committees or Affinity Groups- Key Considerations](#).

### Methods for Improving Workplace Culture

Now with a good understanding of your organization's culture, you can work towards building on it, or maintaining it if it's already in good shape. The following ideas give some specific considerations for workplace culture that is more disability-inclusive:

- **Where possible, develop flexible work practices:** Increasing flexibility in work practices such as hours and location of work can enhance employee satisfaction and help your company be a competitive employer. For example, could office employees sometimes work from home, in a hybrid work model? Can workers in the shop or the warehouse modify their shift schedules or request time off for personal needs such as medical appointments? Flexible arrangements can often support employees with disabilities to perform at their best. Communicating that your company is open to this can be an effective way to attract new talent, including those who might face barriers in a workplace with a lot of constraints.
- **Learning and awareness**
  - Leadership:
    - Ensure leadership is well informed about your organization's practices and policies related to disability, including accommodation protocols, any assistive technology that might be available, etc.
    - Hold training seminars related to informing leadership about various disabilities and how they can show up in the trucking industry workplace. Building awareness on topics such as invisible disabilities or supporting disclosure can be particularly impactful. For some ideas about encouraging employees with disabilities to come forward, see this resource: [Supporting Disability Disclosure](#).
  - Staff:
    - Staff may also benefit from training and information sessions on the various topics related to disability. For example, if there is an employee in the workplace with a specific disability, it could be beneficial to hold a workshop or an information session about that disability.
      - **NOTE:** it is important to consult with the employee if they would be comfortable with that and if they feel it would be appropriate. Level of comfort about discussing a disability openly can vary widely from person to person.

- **Ensure any work-sanctioned social events are inclusive**, or that there is a diverse range of events available. Consider the following:
  - Do work events primarily involve physical activity that may be difficult for those with physical accessibility considerations (e.g., recreational sports teams, volunteer activities such as beach cleanups)?
  - Do themed food days (potlucks, cultural days) offer alternatives for those with invisible disabilities which may create dietary restrictions (e.g., diabetes, celiac disease, allergies)?
  - During social outings, are there opportunities for neurodiverse employees (e.g., employees with autism spectrum disorder) to come in and out as they please, or take a break from socializing if needed?
  - If your office staff or members of your team meet for dinner/drinks after work, are there expectations to drink alcohol? Are options available for those who don't drink? These situations may be difficult to navigate for those with substance use disorder.
- **Establish professional development opportunities:** Facilitate mentorship programs where employees with disabilities can connect with mentors who can provide guidance, support, and career advice.
- **Other recommendations and considerations:**
  - Respond quickly and authentically to any micro-aggressions or inappropriate behaviours that are directed at an employee with disability, or that the employee brings to the attention of the organization.
  - Ask supervisors and/or managers to watch for a lack of inclusion in the workplace.
  - Assign new hires with disabilities a “buddy” to be an ally when needed.

### Key Takeaways

- Finding ways to take stock of your organization and its current climate around disabilities will give you insights on what to prioritize.
- Inclusive physical and digital spaces can lay the groundwork for a welcoming workplace for people with disabilities.
- When creating a welcoming workplace for people with disabilities, remember that everyone has a role to play:
  - Leadership and HR establish expectations and set positive examples, while also holding themselves accountable.
  - Fellow employees and/or team members are responsible for being welcoming and inclusive in day-to-day interactions.