

# Disability in the workplace

*Cara Williams*

Two main reasons underlie the increasing interest in the labour market participation of individuals with disabilities. One stems from employment equity and human rights legislation, which ensures access to the labour market for those with disabilities. Examining differences in labour force participation, education, and occupation and industry profiles may allow governments and employers to better target programs and policies for these individuals.

A second and equally important reason is to determine how to include more individuals with disabilities in the labour force. This is motivated by the concern that shortages of labour and skilled workers will develop as a result of an aging population. One possible way to alleviate this impending shortage is to maximize the participation of those with disabilities.

The 2001 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) provides insight into how these issues are being addressed (see *Data source and definitions*). This article examines the types and severity of disabilities experienced by those aged 15 to 64 in the labour force. It also compares their educational attainment, the types of occupations and industries they work in, and their income with those of the non-disabled population. Also examined are job and workplace modifications that have been put in place by employers. Finally, the potential additional labour supply is investigated by examining characteristics of people with disabilities who are not in the labour force, looking at types of modifications that would enable them to enter the labour market.

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## People with disabilities in the labour market

Excluding those in institutions, in 2001 some 2.0 million Canadians (10%) between the ages of 15 and 64 lived with some type of disability. Roughly 45% were in the labour force, compared with almost 80% of the non-disabled population. Just under 820,000 persons with disabilities were employed while the remaining 98,000 in the labour force were unemployed. This unemployment rate of 10.7% was much higher than the 7.1% in the non-disabled population (Table 1).

For the 2001 PALS, an index of disability severity was constructed based on the reported intensity and frequency of the limitation. Not surprisingly, labour force participation is inversely related to disability severity. The overall participation rate for those with a disability was about 45%. The rate was substantially higher for those with only a mild disability (63%), falling to only 28% for those with a severe or a very severe

**Table 1 Labour force status by degree of disability**

Age 15 to 64	Non-disabled	Total disabled	Degree of disability		
			Mild	Mode-rate	Severe/very severe
			'000		
<b>Labour force</b>	14,198.0	914.9	409.4	271.6	233.9
Men	7,541.6	465.7	219.1	134.8	111.8
Women	6,656.4	449.2	190.3	136.8	122.1
<b>Employed</b>	13,194.8	817.0	379.8	242.7	194.5
Men	6,984.3	413.7	202.4	120.7	90.6
Women	6,210.5	403.3	177.4	122.0	103.9
<b>Unemployed</b>	1,003.2	97.9	29.6	28.9	39.4
Men	557.3	52.0	16.7	14.1	21.2
Women	445.9	45.9	12.9	14.8	18.2
			%		
<b>Unemployment rate</b>	7.1	10.7	7.2	10.6	16.8
Men	7.4	11.2	7.6	10.5	19.0
Women	6.7	10.2	6.8	10.8	14.9

Source: Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001

disability. Of those not in the labour force, 58% suffered from a severe or very severe disability.

Similarly, as the degree of disability increases, so does the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities. For those with a mild disability, the rate was about 7.2% (about the same as the non-disabled population), compared with 16.8% for those with a severe or very severe disability (Table 1).

In general, unemployment rates were higher for men (11.2% versus 10.2% overall), with a greater disparity at the highest degree of disability (19.0% versus 14.9%).

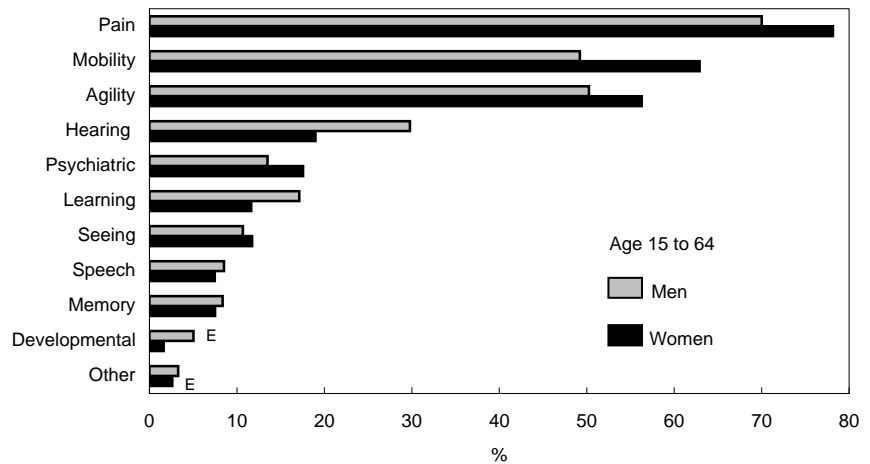
### Various and multiple disabilities

A physical or intellectual disability can come about in different ways. It may be congenital, develop in childhood, or arise later in life through sickness or accident. Some disabilities have little or no effect on a person's ability to work, others necessitate some type of workplace accommodation, while some preclude working at all. Federal, provincial and municipal governments have developed the *In Unison* framework to help those with disabilities join the labour market. This vision aims to "increase the employability of adults with disabilities, encourage entry or re-entry into the labour market, and help promote increased employment and volunteer opportunities. The employment building block depends on access to education and training programs that meet the specific needs of persons with disabilities, making sure jobs are available with the appropriate accommodations, and offering job seekers and employers the information they need." (Canada 2000).

Disabilities experienced by those in the labour force vary. For example, pain was cited by 74% of persons with disabilities, mobility by 56%, and agility by 53%. Hearing was a disability for about 25%, while 16% cited a psychiatric disability, and 14% a learning disability (Chart A). Multiple disabilities were common, with about three-quarters of people having at least two (data not shown).

However, not all disabilities result in activity limitations in the workplace. Among the overall population with disabilities, about 21% of those aged 15 to 64 felt they were not limited at work or school. Not surprisingly, of those with a mild disability who were employed, 53% felt their work was not affected; such was the case for only 8% of those with a severe disability (Table 2).

**Chart A Three-quarters of persons with disabilities in the labour force suffered chronic pain.**



Source: Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001

### Many with disabilities not limited in their current job

It is commonly believed that a disability will affect the amount or kind of work a person can do, putting them at a disadvantage in the workplace. An individual with a disability may be limited in their choice of occupation or where they work. Not surprisingly, the 2001 PALS shows that at some point in the previous five years, about 3 in 10 workers with a disability had to change jobs, one-third the type of work, and about 43% the amount of work.

Even though these changes eased the way for some, about half of workers with disabilities felt their condition limited them in the kind of work they could do in their present job. Individuals with severe or very severe disabilities were more likely to feel this limitation than those with less severe disabilities—for example, 77% with a severe or very severe disability compared with about 35% with a mild disability.

**Table 2 Work limitations**

Age 15 to 64	Total employed	Degree of disability		
		Mild	Mode- rate	Severe/ very severe
<b>Total</b>	<b>817.0</b>	<b>379.8</b>	<b>242.7</b>	<b>194.5</b>
		'000		
Condition affects work or school		%		
Sometimes	33.5	32.7	41.1	25.5
Often	25.4	8.0	28.0	56.4
No	34.5	53.0	26.6	8.2
Not applicable	5.9	5.4 <sup>E</sup>	3.7 <sup>E</sup>	9.5
Because condition				
Change kind of work	33.5	22.3	40.3	46.9
Change amount of work	42.9	29.2	47.6	63.6
Change job	28.2	19.6	32.6	39.3
Condition limits kind of work at present job	51.4	34.9	56.7	77.0
Consider self to be disadvantaged in employment	34.3	17.2	41.0	59.1
Considered disadvantaged by your employer	35.4	19.3	41.3	59.5
Condition makes it difficult to change jobs or advance				
Very difficult	20.9	8.0	20.0	47.4
Difficult	23.0	15.9	31.9	25.6
No	49.3	68.8	41.2	21.3
In the past 5 years because of condition have been				
Refused employment	10.6	4.3	12.5	20.8
Refused a promotion	5.9	2.6 <sup>F</sup>	7.0	11.0
Refused access to training	2.8	1.2 <sup>F</sup>	2.0 <sup>F</sup>	6.9
Terminated from job	6.6	3.6 <sup>E</sup>	7.0	12.0

Source: *Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001*

Employer perceptions of a person's disability may affect whether they are hired, get promoted, receive access to training, or remain employed. But while about 35% of workers with disabilities felt their employer would consider them disadvantaged at work, only about 11% felt they had been refused employment because of their disability in the last five years. Only about 7% felt that they had been fired from their job for this reason, and even fewer (3%) felt they had been denied training.

A person with a disability or long-term condition may feel that their opportunity for promotion or ability to change jobs is reduced. Although 44% of workers felt this way, only 6% felt they had been refused a promotion on this basis (Table 2). While refusal rates might be expected to be higher for those no longer in the labour force, this is not the case. On the question of whether in the last five years they had been

refused employment, promotion or training, or whether they had been terminated as a result of their disability, those no longer in the labour force had lower refusal rates than those working.

### Higher education levels among those working

Workers with disabilities are likely to have more education than their counterparts not in the labour force. About one-third of those employed had at least a post-secondary certificate or diploma, compared with 23% of those unemployed and 17% not in the labour force (Table 3). But this is still substantially lower than the general population aged 15 to 64 with no disability, where about 48% had at least a postsecondary certificate or diploma.

### Occupation and industry

Persons with and without disabilities work in similar occupations, the most common being those related to sales and service (Chart B). These were followed by occupations in business, finance and administration, and those related to trades and transport. However, management occupations showed a difference, and here workers with disabilities were less likely to be found (6% versus 11%).

The industries in which persons with disabilities work are mostly the same as for the non-disabled population, with a few notable differences (Chart C). In particular, those with disabilities were more likely to work in health care and social assistance (12% versus 10%), and slightly less likely to work in retail trade (8% versus 11%).

**Table 3 Highest level of education by labour force status for disabled and non-disabled**

Age 15 to 64	Disabled			Non-disabled	
	Employed	Unemployed	Not in labour force	Population	Employed
<b>Total</b>	<b>817.0</b>	<b>97.9</b>	<b>964.7</b>	<b>17,889.9</b>	<b>13,194.8</b>
<b>Highest level of education<sup>1</sup></b>					
Less than high school	22.3	28.2	45.1	25.3	20.9
High school diploma <sup>2</sup>	41.9	46.7	34.9	26.8	25.3
Post secondary diploma/certificate	20.7	15.7	12.0	27.6	33.7
Bachelor's degree and above	13.9	7.5	5.4	20.4	20.1
Use education at job	66.4	...	...	..	..

1 May not add to 100 because of some non-response.

2 Includes persons who have attended courses at postsecondary institutions and who may or may not have a high school graduation certificate. Excluded persons with a postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree.

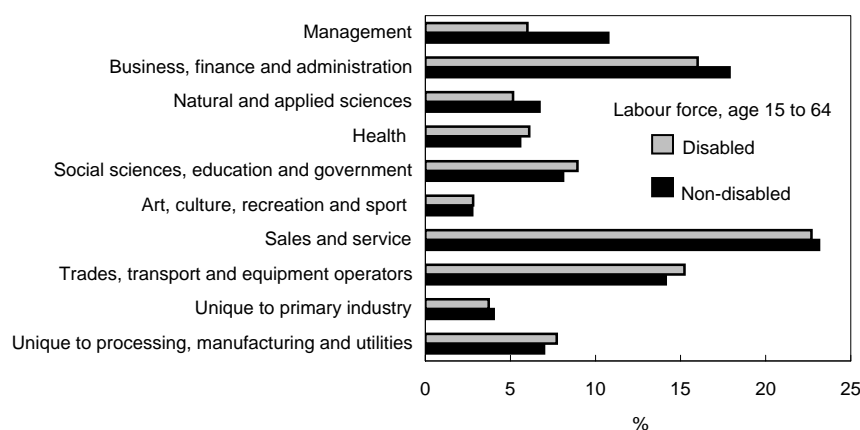
Source: Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001

## Volume of work

Among employees with disabilities, about 73% (595,000) worked full time (30 hours or more per week). One-third of the part-timers gave their condition or disability as the reason they worked part time. Another 30% cited going to school, business conditions, or inability to find work with more hours. Despite feeling their condition prevented them from working full time, part-timers had only a slightly higher likelihood of having a severe or very severe disability—29% compared with 22% for the full-time workers.

## Income

The median employment income of workers with disabilities was \$22,600—about 17% lower than the \$27,100 for other workers (Chart D). However, this varied greatly depending on the severity of the disability. For example, the median earnings of an employed person with a mild disability were \$7,000 higher than those of someone with a severe or very severe disability. Transfers and other sources tended to smooth out income differences—median total income varied only about \$3,300 between the two groups.

**Chart B Disabled persons were less likely to be in management occupations.**

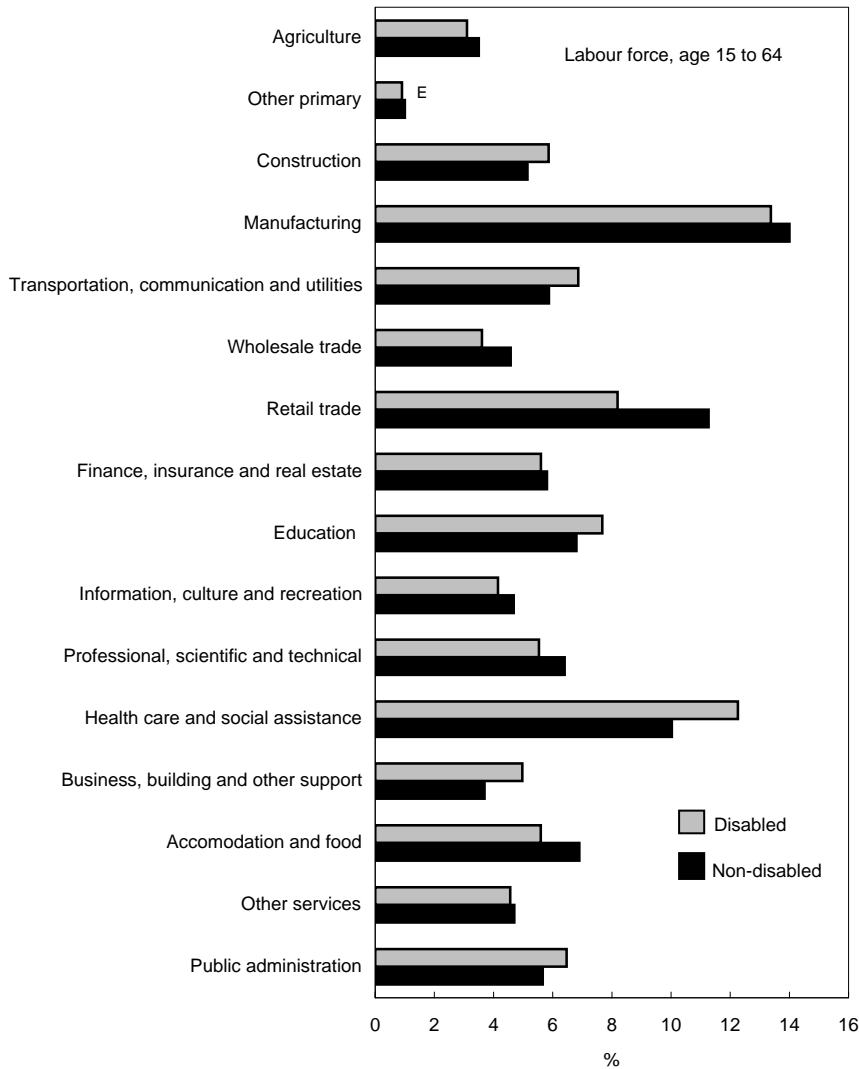
Note: Disabled totals may not add because of "unknown" responses.

Source: Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001

## On-the-job training

In today's economy, workers must continually build and update their skills to keep up with technological advances and open doors to new work experiences. Work-related training can be initiated and paid for by either the employee or the employer. In 2001, just over half of all workers with a disability had participated in work-related training at some point over the previous five years, nearly matching

**Chart C Disabled persons were more likely to work in health care and social assistance.**



Source: Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001

**Data source and definitions**

The Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS), conducted between September 2001 and January 2002, collected information about persons whose everyday activities were limited because of a health-related problem or condition. A sample of 35,000 adults was derived from individuals who answered positively to the activity limitation questions on the 2001 Census form. The survey population was composed of persons in private and some collective households in the 10 provinces. People in the territories, in institutions, and on Indian reserves were excluded.

Information on persons with disabilities was last collected in 1991 through the Health and Activity Limitation Survey (HALS). Major changes made to the structure of the sample and the questions identifying people with disabilities preclude comparison between the 1986 and 1991 HALS and the 2001 PALS.

**Disability**

PALS is based on the World Health Organization's framework of disability provided by the International Classification of Functioning. This framework defines disability as the relationship between body structures and functions, daily activities and social participation, while recognizing the role of environmental factors.

Persons with disabilities are those who reported difficulties with daily living activities or who indicated that a physical or mental condition or health problem reduced the kind or amount of activities they could do. Answers to the disability questions represent respondents' perception of their situation and are, therefore, somewhat subjective.

the 58% for the non-disabled population (Table 4).<sup>1</sup> The most commonly cited reason for taking training among workers with disabilities was for their current or future job (83%), followed distantly by personal interest (8%). This training paid off—over 80%

used the skills they had learned, either somewhat or to a great extent.

However, some workers are unable to take work-related training. In the non-disabled population, about 16% of the employed who did not take training had wanted to but

were unable. For workers with disabilities, the percentage was higher—about 25% (100,000). Their reasons for not taking training varied, but the most common was the high cost (45%).

**Table 4 Training questions**

	Disabled	Non-disabled
	%	
<b>All employed</b>		
Work related training in the past 5 years	50.8	57.5
Took course		
For current or future job	82.7	..
Because of condition	2.8 <sup>E</sup>	..
Personal interest	7.9	..
Other reason	4.7 <sup>E</sup>	..
Use the skills developed from this course		
To a great extent	55.2	..
Somewhat	27.0	..
Very little	8.4	..
Not at all	8.0	..
<b>No training in last 5 years</b>		
Wanted to take some	25.1	16.4
<b>Barriers to training</b>		
Location not accessible	13.3	..
Courses were not adapted to needs	16.0	..
Requested but employer denied	8.0	..
Condition made it impossible	27.6	..
Inadequate transportation	6.9	..
Too costly	44.9	..
Other reasons	30.0	..

Sources: Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001; Adult Education and Training Survey, 2002

Abilities Foundation found that the average annual cost of accommodation per worker would be less than \$500 (Prost and Redmond 2005).

In 2001, the most common accommodations needed by workers with disabilities were modified or reduced work hours (23%) and job redesign<sup>3</sup> (22%) (Chart E). Only a few required physical accommodations such as workstation modifications (7%), appropriate parking (5%), or an accessible washroom (4%). For the most part, job accommodations are granted, although this was not the case for 25% of workers with disabilities. This could be because the accommodation was prohibitively expensive or would have constituted a health or safety risk. The unemployed with disabilities had higher accommodation needs—about 41% required job redesign and 35% required modified or reduced hours.

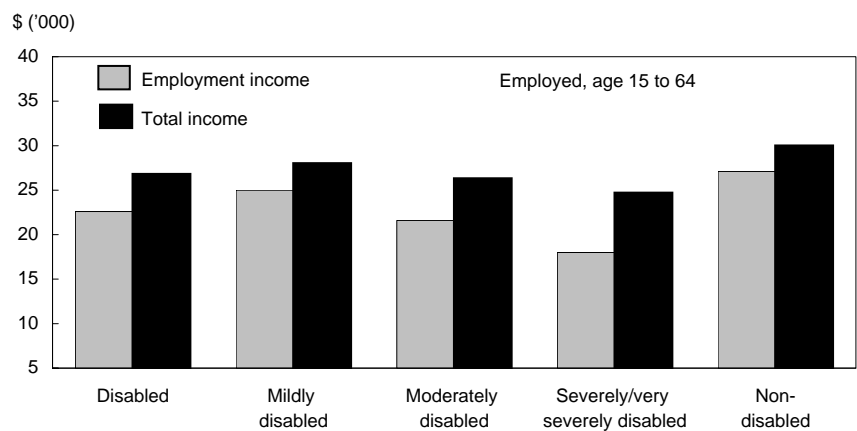
**Increasing the pool of labour**

Ensuring access to the labour market for persons with disabilities is more than an individual and human rights issue; the benefits accrue to society as a whole. Although the labour force already includes individuals with disabilities, it could be expanded by encouraging others to join. Moreover, because disability rates increase with age, ensuring workplace accessibility may help some individuals to remain in the labour pool. This in turn will retain the experience and knowledge of many older workers.

**Job accommodation**

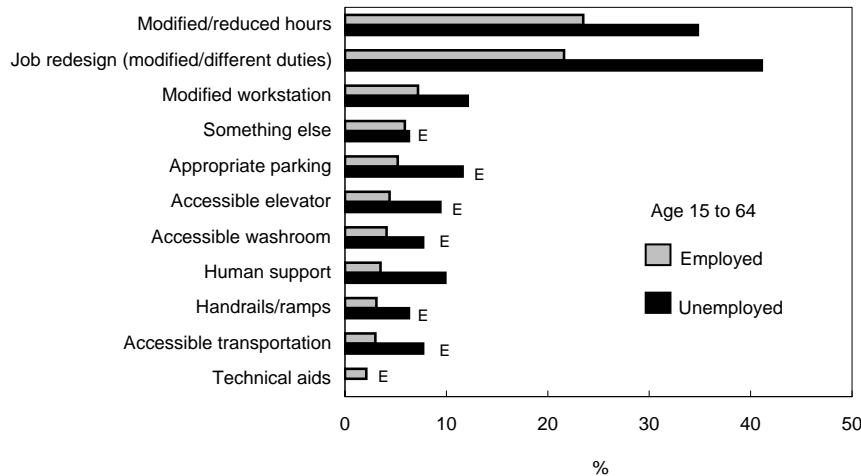
Modifications in the workplace, whether a change in hours, a modified workstation, or an accessible washroom, can enable someone to remain in or join the labour force. In 1982, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guaranteed the rights of those with physical and mental disabilities. Canada’s human rights legislation requires employers to accommodate the accessibility needs of people with disabilities, provided that doing so does not cause undue hardship.<sup>2</sup> While the 2001 PALS did not examine the cost of job accommodation, a recent study by the Canadian

**Chart D Workers with disabilities generally had lower earnings.**



Source: Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001

**Chart E Job or schedule modifications were the most common need of workers with disabilities.**



Note: Self-employed were not asked these questions and are not included.  
 Source: Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001

A reliable estimate of the potential additional labour supply is difficult to establish since only some of those with disabilities who are not in the labour force would be able to participate. In 2001, about 965,000 people with disabilities between the ages of 15 and 64 were not in the labour force. Of these, about 394,000 said their condition completely precluded working. The remaining 571,000 comprise a potential labour pool.

Of these individuals, about 422,000 were limited in the kind or amount of work they could do. This is not surprising since, compared with individuals with disabilities in the labour force, those not in the labour force are twice as likely to have a severe or very severe disability (58% versus 26%).

It follows that these people would also be more likely to need workplace modifications. Indeed, more than one-third required job redesign or a modified or reduced work schedule to be able to work, compared with 21% of their counterparts in the labour force (Chart F). Those not in the labour force were also much more likely to require structural changes, such as accessible washrooms and elevators, handrails and ramps, or modified workstations.

Thus, in terms of the potential gains in employment for individuals with disabilities who are currently not in the labour force, it is clear that only a portion would be able to work, and most would require some type of job or workplace modification.

### Disability by age

In general, disability rates increase with age. Allowing workers who develop disabilities later in life to remain in the labour force will help ensure an adequate supply of labour. While it is not possible to forecast the disability rates of older workers in the future, the 2001 rates may provide some indication.

Among the working-age population (15 to 64), the overall disability rate was about 10%. However, rates differed by age group. For those 15 to 24, the rate was about 4%, increasing to about 9% for those 25 to 54, and to 22% for those 55 to 64.

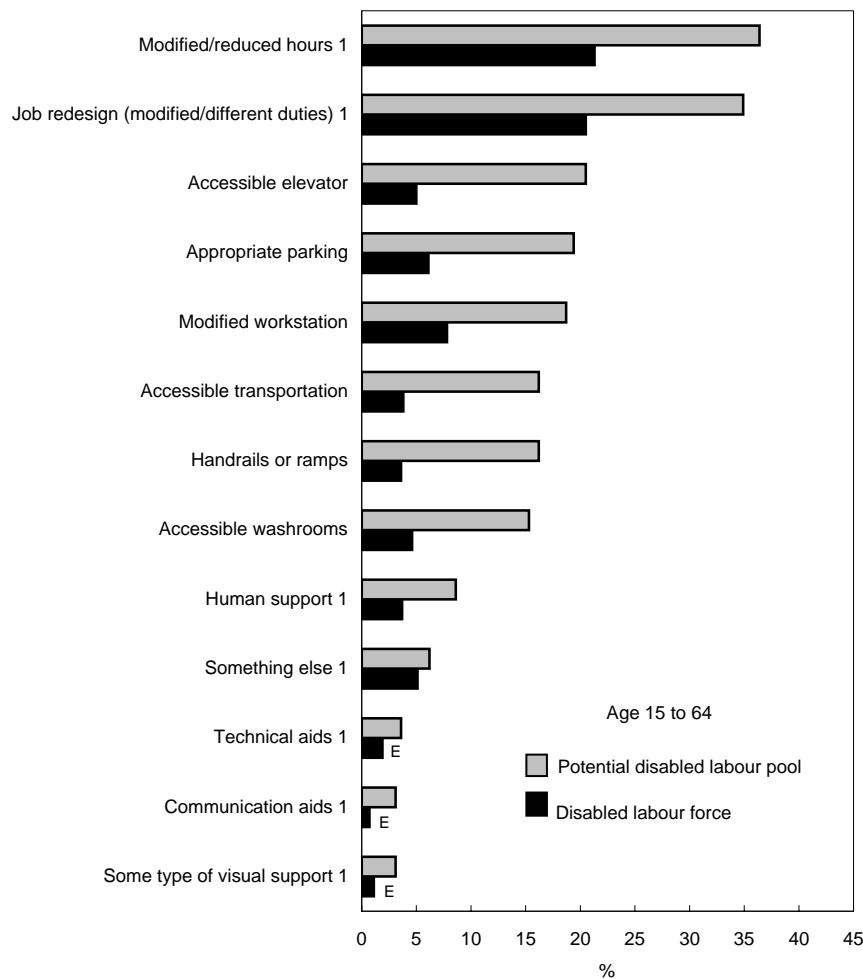
The severity of disability also increased somewhat with age. About 31% of 15 to 24 year-olds with a disability rated it as severe or very severe, compared with about 45% of the 55-to-64 age group.

The above factors make it interesting to examine whether labour force participation is different for older and younger workers with disabilities. In 2001, about 611,000 individuals

aged 55 to 64 had a disability—about 22% of the total population that age. Labour force participation rates for persons with disabilities did vary somewhat by age—55% of those aged 25 to 54 were in the labour force compared with 27% of those aged 55 to 64.

Given that age brings with it increasing disability rates and severity of conditions coupled with declining labour force participation, it is important to determine if older individuals with long-term conditions are more likely to have higher workplace accommodation needs. PALS indicates no statistically significant difference between the accommodation needs of older and younger (25 to 54) workers. Given that 73% of people with disabilities aged 55 to 64 are not in the labour force, one might expect them to have more need of workplace modifications. However, this was not the case. Some 42% of those aged 25 to 54 and not in the labour force felt they would need some type of workplace modification compared with 32% of their older counterparts.

**Chart F Job and schedule changes were top priorities to get individuals with disabilities into the labour force.**



1 Self-employed were not asked these questions and are not included.  
Source: Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001

**Summary**

Canada’s human rights legislation ensures the right to accommodation in the workplace for people with disabilities. Ensuring access to the labour market for people with disabilities may also be a way to help alleviate an impending labour shortage caused by an aging population. The 2001 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey identified about two million Canadians aged 15 to 64 with disabilities, about 45% of whom were in the labour force. Their disabilities are varied and about 75% have multiple problems.

Having a disability does not necessarily equate to being limited at work. Indeed, about 35% of those employed had no perceived workplace limitation. For others who had accommodation needs, modified hours or job redesign was most common.

For the most part, the occupations and industries employing people with disabilities are similar to those of the non-disabled, the exception being management occupations where the former were half as likely to be found.

The median employment income for workers with disabilities in 2001 was less than that of the non-disabled population. However, for those with a mild disability, employment income was similar to the non-disabled. Transfers and other sources of income smooth out a large part of differences in total income. Median total income varied only about \$3,300 between those with a mild disability and those with a severe one. The median total income of employed individuals with a disability was \$26,800 compared with \$30,000 for their counterparts with no disability.

Of those with a disability who were not in the labour force, about 40% were completely unable to work. Enabling some portion of the remaining 571,000 to work is more likely to require workplace and job accommodation, since they are twice as likely as their working counterparts to have a severe or very severe disability. The most common would be job redesign, modified hours, or physical changes to the workplace.

**Perspectives**



### ■ Notes

1 Data on work-related training for the non-disabled population is from the 2002 Adult Education and Training Survey. Reasons for taking work-related training are not comparable with PALS data.

2 Undue hardship refers to the costs associated with accommodation. For example, undue hardship would result if accommodation would make a company insolvent. In addition, it refers to possible health and safety risks. For example, accommodation must not compromise worker safety. Research suggests that the estimated costs of accommodation are fairly low. In 1994, 68% of accommodation costs in the U.S. were under \$500, while the median cost per worker with a disability was \$250 (Cantor 1998).

3 Job redesign refers to modified or different duties.

### ■ References

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