



READY

PRÊTS

WILLING

DISPONIBLES

& ABLE

& CAPABLES

Career Advancement


Key Learnings and Highlights from the Ready, Willing and Able (RWA) 2022 Individual Professional Development Plan (IPDP) project.

CONTEXT

We define ‘career advancement’ as the progression and improvement of an individual’s skills and talents to meet the goals they set for their working life. This could be:

- Taking on new or increased responsibilities,
- Working towards higher-level positions
- Learning and applying new or more refined skills and opportunities for growth and success within a chosen field or organization

Career advancement is different for different people. For some, it may mean working their way up through a “career advancement ladder” with a specific employer. For others, it may mean switching employers, or becoming their own employer, so that they can use the skills and talents that are underused where they currently are employed. Some people may find training or skills development through employer-provided opportunities (for example, an





employer offers first aid or manager training so an employee can take on a new role). For others, this may mean finding skills development opportunities outside their current employer (through courses or post-secondary training).

THE CHALLENGE

For persons with disabilities, particularly those with an intellectual disability or autism, the primary focus is on assisting them to initially enter the competitive labour market (usually in entry level positions). Unfortunately, after this initial entry, there is little attention or support to enable these employees to have equitable access to promotional opportunities or to acquire the skills and/or experience necessary to secure other positions in which they might be interested.

Companies that have inclusive workplaces focus on hiring employees with disabilities, but are usually less attentive about how to help employees grow and advance as professionals and workers. For example, one study of employers (DisabilityIN. 2022) showed that 83% are working to recruit people with disabilities, but only 10% of those companies had executives who identified as having any disabilities. At the same time, many employment agencies that support people with disabilities are limited in the support they can offer to help people who already have a job. This means agencies often lack the resources needed to support someone who wants to explore or take steps towards career advancement. Additionally, employees with an intellectual disability or autism are often unable to identify or access the types of additional training or experience necessary to position themselves to take advantage of promotional opportunities.






We all play a role in supporting career advancement. For employees with an intellectual disability or on the autism spectrum it means setting goals, working to build the required skills to meet those goals, and communicating an interest in advancement opportunities with an employer. For employers, building a truly inclusive workplace means making the most of an employee's skills, talents, and potential by giving them opportunities to grow. Employment agencies need to help individuals (post-hire) explore their options and connect to supports and services that help advance those goals. Agencies ideally have a role to play in working with employers to create career paths for the employees they support.


THE IPDP PROJECT

To address this gap and help show that inclusive employment goes beyond finding a job, RWA worked with 14 supported employment agencies across Canada. Together, those agencies worked with 59 people with an intellectual disability or on the autism spectrum.

RWA asked agencies to work with individuals they selected to create Individual Professional Development Plans (commonly called IPDPs). These plans laid out the steps an individual could take to advance their careers to meet their individual work and life goals. Agencies were then provided with the necessary funds to take these identified steps.

This project's goals focused on three groups. First and foremost, to give dozens of people an opportunity to have support in career advancement; to demonstrate the success that individuals could have if given opportunities to set goals; and to show the relatively small investment of resources they needed to work towards





them. Second, to give local employment agencies the resources they needed to develop the tools and practices needed to demonstrate that career advancement is an important part of inclusive employment, and that supports for career advancement are something that can be done well if resourced. And finally, it was designed to educate employers that an inclusive workplace is one where career development opportunities are something that every person can access and understand.


“In most of our IPDPs, the individuals wanted to gather certification to ‘even the playing field’ with their current colleagues in the hopes that if an opportunity would arise in their place of employment — they could surely apply. It increases their optimism and increases their confidence to give other opportunities a shot! It has been a worthwhile project for our team and the IPDP participants.”

— *Avalon Employment*

IPDP PROJECT OUTCOMES

- Enrolled 59 participants in programs or courses, identified through their IPDP, which helped them advance toward their career advancement goals
- Identified common career advancement programs many participants required for advancement. These included First Aid/CPR, Commercial Vehicle Driver’s License Upgrades, Forklift License, Culinary programs, and Leadership courses.
- Assisted employees discuss advancement opportunities with their employers, educating employers and individuals
- Facilitated conversations on strengths, challenges, and accommodations that benefited individuals, agencies, and employers





“One of the RWA IPDP beneficiaries has just successfully completed her 40-hour Child Care Attendant (CCA) certification, which will result in not just a significant pay bump, but a new track for pay increases in the coming years.”

— *SCE Life Works*

“The participant was successful in securing employment after he completed his Class 2 driver’s license to become a bus driver.” — *Society for Autism Supports and Services*

SUCCESS HIGHLIGHTS

The IPDP project highlighted the importance and value of career advancement for persons with disabilities. This project empowered participants to explore their career interests and options. To do so, there was a strong need to increase accessibility, education, and awareness to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal opportunities for career growth and advancement in the Canadian labor force. Through meaningful planning and person-centered supports, employers, support agents, and other key players can create a more inclusive and equitable workforce for all Canadians. The lessons learned from this project will be invaluable in shaping future initiatives that support career advancement for job seekers and employees with an intellectual disability or on the autism spectrum in Canada.



LESSONS LEARNED

- The current system is focused on helping individuals secure a 'job' rather than achieve career goals
- Many individuals are not prepared to take advantage of advancement opportunities
- Career advancement opportunities often overlook people with disabilities and are not structured for equality of opportunities
- Career advancement pathways are not always straight forward. This is challenging for everyone, but often made more challenging for people with a disability.
- Rural areas already have barriers around accessing the necessary courses or programs someone might need to progress in their employment or sector. When combined with common mobility challenges that often accompany a disability, being disabled in a rural place makes it harder to be prepared for advancement opportunities.
- Exploring career advancement created a sense of unease for some of the participants. Many employees worry about upsetting their current employer by discussing career advancement. They also worry this could have affect the stability of their current roles/positions.

“NS has become a full-time employee at Costco as a Front-End Assistant, that was her goal when she was a part-time employee.” — *Community Living York South*

CONCRETE STEPS FOR CREATING EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

- ▶ Increase accessibility to career advancement opportunities for persons with disabilities
 - There should be a specific attention to resources and opportunities for those living in remote and rural areas
- ▶ Provide more education and support for employers to foster a culture of career advancement and inclusion for persons with disabilities. This can be done through educational workshops and cross- sectoral collaborations with other employers who have been successful at promoting employees with disabilities
- ▶ Increase awareness and understanding of career advancement opportunities for persons with disabilities by creating intentional opportunities for mentorship, professional development, and providing individuals the opportunity to explore fields or areas outside their current role or position
- ▶ Ensure that employees with disabilities have equal access to any/all training opportunities offered by the employer
- ▶ Provide additional resources to employment support agencies to enable a focus on career advancement
- ▶ Foster career pathways to leadership roles and opportunities for persons with disabilities
- ▶ Ensure active efforts toward representation from the disability community in leadership roles to build a higher performing firm (see RWA Business Case for more on the benefits of inclusive employment)

Special thanks to:

Avalon Employment
Autism Nova Scotia
Kerry's Place
SCE Life Works
Society for Autism Support and Services
Gateway Associations
Level It UP
Live Work Play
Inclusion Yukon
Nunavummi Disabilities
Makinnasuaqtiit Society
Community Living York South Ontario
Orbital Learning
Inclusion NB
Inclusion BC