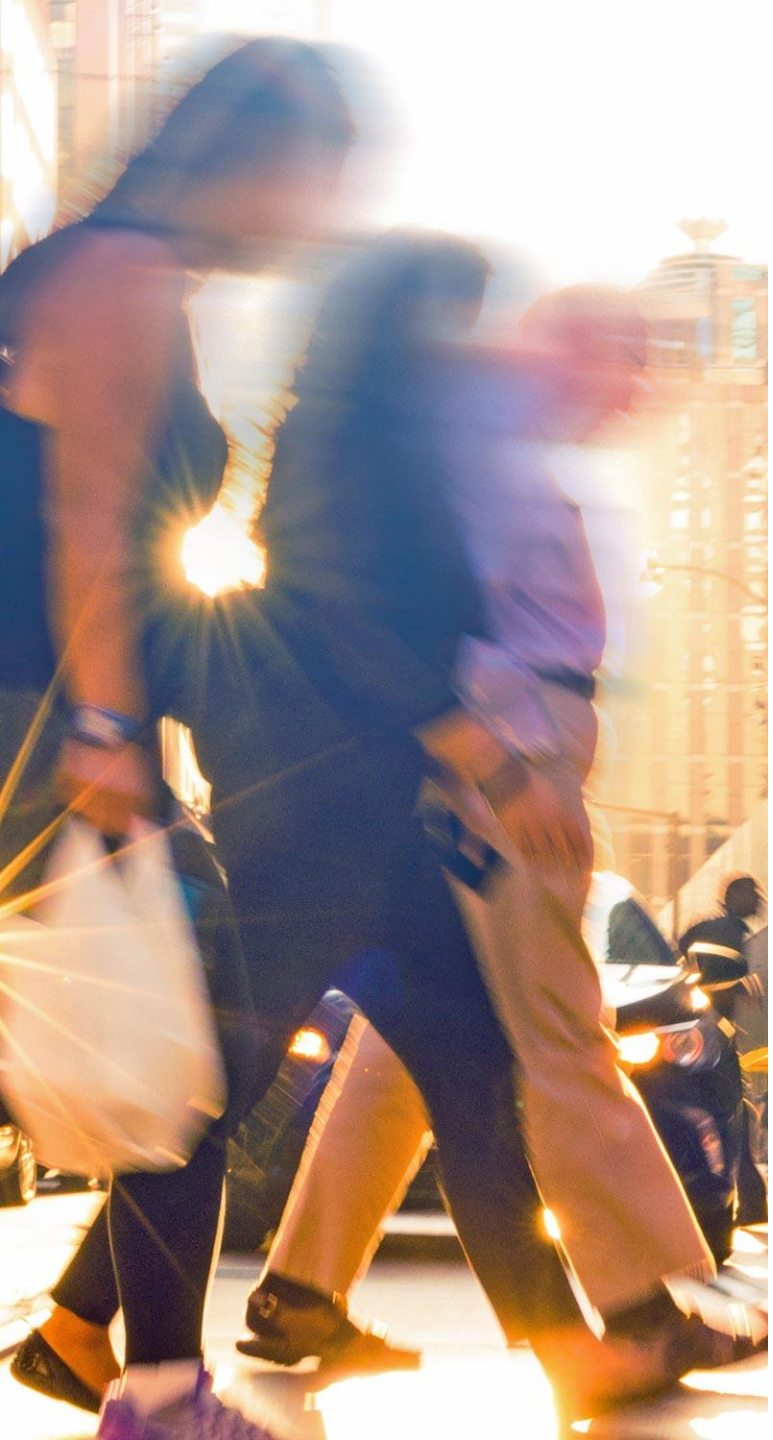

On Mental Health, Remote Work and Shared Accountability: Complex and Evolving Perspectives on Workplace Support and Accommodation

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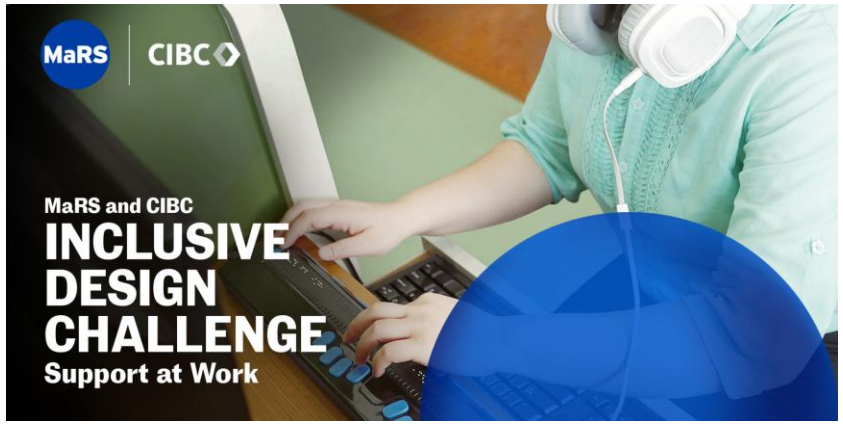
ACED
Accommodating and Communicating about Episodic Disabilities



Thank you to our Participants

We are extremely grateful to our participants who shared their experiences and insights into organizational support provision

Takeaway Messages

- Disability support provision is changing – growing in complexity, volume and diversity of requests
- Increased organizational cooperation and efforts are improving accessibility and inclusivity
- New challenges are arising in implementing support and are related to organizational and worker perceptions and expectations
- We identify areas where education, awareness and research are needed, as well where organizations can work to enhance support implementation

Study Context & Research Question

- Workplaces have undergone considerable change with COVID-19 adjustments to work, greater emphasis on EDI, increased recognition of psychosocial work factors, AI, and other changes

- The impact of changes on support and accommodation provision to workers with chronic and episodic physical conditions, mental health conditions, and neurodiversity is unclear

What are the successes, challenges and emerging issues in disability support provision from the perspectives of organizational support providers?

What is a Disability?

A disability is a limitation in performing an activity that arises as a result of the interaction between a health or other condition AND personal and environmental factors, including negative attitudes, public policies and practices, inaccessible physical environments, and limited social support

Changes to work activities or work practices may help minimize or ameliorate activity limitations

(Statistics Canada, 2023; World Health Organization (WHO), https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability)

Background: Worker Perspectives

- Numerous work-related challenges are reported by individuals living with physical, mental health, and neurodiverse conditions
  - Precarious and lower quality jobs
  - Less access to support
  - Concerns about support seeking and sharing information
- Workers with disabilities report positive and negative support outcomes
  - Positive: Help with job tasks, increased understanding from others, reduced stress, improved interpersonal relationships
  - Negative: gossip, stigma, reputational damage, impacts on career goals, job loss

(Baldwin et al., 2023; Bogaers et al., 2023; Brouwers, 2020; Gignac et al., 2021, 2024, 2025; Jessiman-Perreault et al., in press, Quinn et al., 2017; Richard et al., 2026; Shahidi et al., 2023; Woticky et al., in press)

Background: Organizational Perspectives

- Fewer studies focus on support provision from the perspective of organizational support providers
  - Limited managerial experience and understanding of worker needs
  - Negative organizational attitudes and stereotypes (e.g., needs not perceived as legitimate, reasonable)
  - A belief that responsibility for change lies with the worker and not the workplace (i.e., a medical model of disability)
- Some positive changes reported
  - Growing workplace awareness, knowledge and efforts to provide support

(Frøyland et al., 2025; Gignac et al., 2021; Hennekam et al., 2021; Krupa et al., 2009; Kirsh et al., 2018; Quinane et al., 2021; Shankar et al., 2014; Thisted et al., 2020; Vesely et al., 2026)

Research Gaps

We need:

- Insight into support provision that reflects recent changes in many organizations
- Inclusion of a broader range of workplace roles (e.g., union representatives) and sectors (e.g., education, healthcare, construction, transportation, manufacturing, primary industries, public safety)

Study Aim: To inform support provision improvements through a better understanding of the experiences of workplace support providers

Methods

- **Study Design: Qualitative Content Analysis***
  - Underscores the importance of experiences, context, perceptions
  - Describes phenomena without preconceived theoretical categories or concepts

- **Recruitment & Participants**
  - Recruited across Canada
  - Used IWH newsletter, employer networks and researcher contacts

*Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Neuendorf, 2002

Methods

- **Procedure & Analyses**
  - Semi-structured, online interviews lasting ~60-75 minutes
  - Topics discussed:
    - Organization type, size and workforce
    - Who comes forward with what; what are they seeking
    - The support process and any changes
    - Who is involved in providing support
    - Appraisals of challenges, successes, system-level factors, context, emerging issues
  - Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify topics, themes and patterns in the data

Findings: Participants (n = 32)

Variable	N (%)
Gender: Woman	26 (81.3)
Age (mean years)	47.8
Lived experience with disability	12 (37.5)
Support role	
Human resources personnel	6 (18.7)
Disability manager	14 (43.8)
Union/worker advocate	8 (25.0)
Manager/employer	4 (12.5)
Organization size	
> 500	22 (68.7)
100-499	3 (9.4)
50-99	3 (9.4)
< 50	4 (12.5)

Variable	N (%)
Job sector	
Business/finance	2 (6.3)
Government	6 (18.7)
Education	4 (12.5)
Healthcare	5 (15.6)
Manufacturing	3 (9.4)
Construction	3 (9.4)
Transportation	2 (6.3)
Utilities / energy	3 (9.4)
Public safety	1 (3.1)
Non-profit, professional services	2 (6.3)
Other	1 (3.1)

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Findings: Participants

- Participants supported a wide range of job types
  - Flexibility in when/where work could be performed versus on-site only
  - Safety sensitive/critical
  - Shift work
  - Work travel
  - Unionized, worker advocates, non-unionized
  - Physically demanding, mentally demanding
  - Permanent/contract/seasonal
  - Urban/rural/remote work
- All participants were experienced in support provision processes and believed strongly in its value
- General perception: support processes are improving; it often works well. But there were areas of change, complexity, challenge and tension identified

Four interrelated themes

Theme 1 – Complexities in supporting mental health, neurodiversity and wellbeing at work

Theme 2 – Fully remote work as a flashpoint for questioning support processes

Theme 3 – Implementing a disability process: Enhancing accessibility while formalizing accommodation processes

Theme 4 – Interpersonal dynamics: The need for shared accountability and an ability mindset

Theme 1

Complexities in supporting mental health, neurodiversity and wellbeing at work

Theme 1 Focus

- Growing volume, frequency and complexity of support requests
  - Work-life balance
  - Burnout
  - Common mental health conditions
  - Neurodiversity
  - Mental illness
  - Substance use, suicide
- Pathologizing everyday stress
- Challenges with self-diagnosis and understanding essential job duties
- Need for education, especially to support neurodiversity
- Context matters
  - Substance use, addiction, suicide an important issue in some sectors

Theme 1

Complexities in supporting mental health, neurodiversity and wellbeing at work

Self Diagnosis & Essential Job Duties

- Participants appreciated that workers were willing to share mental health needs
- Sharing precipitated further conversation, although some workers felt disclosure should be enough to forgo some job activities

Theme 1

Complexities in supporting mental health, neurodiversity and wellbeing at work

Self Diagnosis & Essential Job Duties

- Participants appreciated that workers were willing to share mental health needs
- Sharing precipitated further conversation, although some workers felt disclosure should be enough to forgo some job activities

A "candidate disclosed that they had a mental disability… Then the candidate requested not to go through the interview process. [That] leads to a bigger and bigger conversation... [We don't want] candidates to think that this is something that, as long as they share or they disclose anything, they can bypass certain critical steps." (Supervisor, Finance)

"I've been seeing a spike in what I would say self-diagnosed, self-disclosure, and that creates an interesting dynamic for us…it's safety critical [work, that] isn't sufficient." (DM, Transportation)

Theme 1

Complexities in supporting mental health, neurodiversity and wellbeing at work

Context Matters: Job Sector

Substance use, addiction, suicide

- Not common, but a serious concern in safety critical sectors like construction, utilities, transportation, manufacturing, public safety
- Awareness, education, and action are priorities, but systemic and professional culture barriers are significant

Theme 1

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[re: mental health] “Even though we’ve been talking about it for over a decade, few people in my world have. They don’t even know when they’re talking to someone…and chances are [a worker] wouldn’t even admit it.” (Disability Manager, Utilities)

“The older group had a different mentality. They didn’t put up their hand [to ask for help] – they drank. There was a lot of alcoholism…There were a lot of unhealthy people…and there were…suicides.” (Union representative, Multiple sectors)

Theme 2

Fully remote work as a flashpoint for questioning support processes

Theme 2 Focus

- Positive aspects of fully remote work
  - Helped recruit and retain talent in small businesses
  - Helped with staffing in diverse locations
  - Improved disability inclusion
- Negative aspects of fully remote work
  - Social isolation
  - Degradation of skills
  - Challenges in maintaining a team atmosphere
- Participants generally agreed that fully remote work could be beneficial and improve inclusivity
- Conversations were a flashpoint for broader discussions about disability; worker needs, rights and preferences; workplace expectations; the workplace environment

Theme 2

Fully remote work as a flashpoint for questioning support processes

Fully Remote Work: Positive & Negative Aspects

"We're seeing almost an equal number of our employees experiencing benefits to remote work and those experiencing challenges and barriers… What we were hearing from the disability community is, 'this is great'… but, what we're actually seeing with our caseload was that there were also people having mental health challenges related to the isolation." (HR, education)

"My experience with people that are working from home 100% of the time…I sense a ton of social anxiety the minute they step into a boardroom with us. They're in a different world than those of us who come in every day." (Worker Advocate, Government)

Theme 2

Fully remote work as a flashpoint for questioning support processes

Challenging Conceptions of Support

- Fully remote work highlighted the need for broader support discussions:
  - Should fully remote work be considered a special accommodation or a regular work arrangement?
  - What are workers entitled to?
  - What is the balance among organizational and worker needs and worker preferences?

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Challenging Conceptions of Support

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"What's the difference in working from home that you need it as the accommodation? And that became a very big bone of debate amongst everybody, even among my own colleagues…the conversation had to deepen. I had to get to the heart of why. What is that difference that you need to work from home?" (HR, Government)

Theme 3

Implementing a disability process:

Enhancing accessibility while formalizing accommodation processes

Theme 3 Focus

- Theme centred around implementation of support
  - Moving toward social models of disability and accessibility
  - Continued reliance on medical models of disability and formalizing support processes
  - Strains on accommodation processes
  - Context matters: Episodic disabilities; Sector differences

Theme 3

Implementing a disability process:

Enhancing accessibility while formalizing accommodation processes

Moving Toward Social Models of Disability and Accessibility

- Organizations reported progress in improving accessibility and addressing workplace barriers that can contribute to disability
- Yet they found it challenging to implement consistent and transparent processes

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"And that is part of our inclusive design HR strategy…they meet with their manager, and a manager asks them one question – 'what do you need to succeed?'" (Manager, Not-for-profit)

"That's something we're struggling with…[We want] workplaces to be flexible but where is the line between flexibility and a formal process and an accommodation?" (HR, Education)

Theme 3

Implementing a disability process:

Enhancing accessibility while formalizing accommodation processes

Formalizing and Validating Accommodations

- Formalizing accommodation plans was often a response to growing accommodation demands, the need for transparency, and strain on the organization
- Formal plans were seen as protecting workers and the organization

Theme 3

Implementing a disability process:

Enhancing accessibility while formalizing accommodation processes

Formalizing and Validating Accommodations

- Formalizing accommodation plans was often a response to growing accommodation demands, the need for transparency, and strain on the organization
- Formal plans were seen as protecting workers and the organization

"We want everything recorded and done officially and properly…trying to make sure that it all comes through one central place" (Union representative, Multiple sectors)

"We want to make sure we get it documented and have a formal plan in place because that's going to protect all of us." (DM, Public Safety)

[re: strain on the system] "They've already accommodated a third of their staff members…and they've already accommodated [many] of them not to work evening shifts… they just can't absorb any more or accommodate any more." (Union Representative, Healthcare)

Theme 3

Implementing a disability process:

Enhancing accessibility while formalizing accommodation processes

Context Matters: Episodic Conditions

- Many episodic conditions created a temporary problem that could be managed by the organization
- Challenges with episodic disabilities often arose where work was conducted in teams or where a worker replacement could not readily be accessed

Theme 3

Implementing a disability process:

Enhancing accessibility while formalizing accommodation processes

Context Matters: Episodic Conditions

- Many episodic conditions created a temporary problem that could be managed by the organization
- Challenges with episodic disabilities often arose where work was conducted in teams or where a worker replacement could not readily be accessed

"We have the folks with episodic conditions and those are still harder to accommodate because it's unpredictable…As accommodating as a supervisor wants to be, you can't plan for staffing…so that is always going to be a problem" (DM, Public Safety).

Theme 3

Implementing a disability process:

Enhancing accessibility while formalizing accommodation processes

Context Matters: Job Sector

- Systemic-level challenges were reported in construction related to:
  - The range of “employers” involved (e.g., owners, contractors, sub-contractors) and identifying who is/should be responsible for support
  - A culture that discourages support seeking as a weakness or flaw
  - Challenges with transferability of skills and education levels

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"Someone's going to say, it's too hot… It's unsafe. Someone on the crew will say to them, well, then go home. You don't want your money? Go home… Then the owner comes to the general contractor and says, you missed this milestone…. I'm going to charge you… If you want to see working conditions get better for workers in construction and trades, owners need to be responsible." (HR, Construction)

"They're all handy. They're tinkerers. They are the man…I do advocate for them, and I encourage them all the time to go [to a health professional]…. They don't want to talk about it. They want to put duct tape on their drill and go back to work." (DM, Construction)

Theme 4

Interpersonal dynamics:

The need for shared accountability and an ability mindset

Theme 4 Focus

- Positive changes in working together to provide support
- Perceptions of support entitlements, incivility and perceived fairness
- Disclosure and trusting the process
- System-level issues (e.g., delays, multiple levels of approval)
- Context matters: cultural differences and support equity

Theme 4

Interpersonal dynamics:

The need for shared accountability and an ability mindset

Positive Changes to Support Dynamics

- HR, DMs and union representatives often noted a greater willingness of groups to work together early and increased positive interactions
- Working together fostered trust in the process and gave workers clear representation

Theme 4

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- Working together fostered trust in the process and gave workers clear representation

"We operate off the same rule book. We want the same thing. I don't think this needs to be adversarial. And I have had a lot of success in working collaboratively with union reps for really good outcomes." (Disability manager, Utilities)

Theme 4

Interpersonal dynamics:

The need for shared accountability and an ability mindset

Perceived Entitlement, Incivility, and Lack of Trust

- Shared accountability for managing disability was noted as essential
- Although not universal, participants reported increased incidents of perceived entitlement to some types of accommodations, incivility, and a lack of trust in the process
- Unwillingness to disclose information needed to implement support sometimes led to disability being conflated with performance

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"[We want] a shared accountability of an ability mindset – 'Yes, I have a unique way of needing to make work, work for me, but I'm going to put in the [effort]' versus 'Employer, I just don't like my job. It's hard for me, what are you going to do for me?'" (HR, Utilities)

Theme 4

Interpersonal dynamics:

The need for shared accountability and an ability mindset

Context Matters: Culture and Support Equity

- Participants recognized the need to better communicate support processes to newcomers with different work support cultures and language differences to improve support equity
- They recognized cultural values impact support seeking

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Re: An external community group
"They're putting on a program for language comprehension for the workplace…it's [teaching] English based on our policies, our procedures, our safe work instructions." (DM, Construction)

"How do we make it safe for everyone to access services and to participate, but also not trumping their values [and what] they're adding to Canada with that." (Union, Healthcare)

Moving Support Provision Forward: Next Steps

Complexities supporting mental health, neurodiversity and wellbeing

- Education for all workers about organizational support processes and expectations; support resources (e.g., https://aced.iwh.on.ca)
- Education for support providers to better support neurodiversity
- Awareness & training in safety sensitive job sectors for early identification, prevention and support for mental health and substance use

Fully remote work as a flashpoint for questioning support processes

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Fully remote work as a flashpoint for questioning support processes

- Research evaluating fully remote work for people with disabilities and others should included workplace outcomes, job skills changes, interpersonal working relationships, workplace culture, and worker health and wellbeing
- Discussions at all levels of an organization about support accessibility and worker and employer rights and obligations in support provision

Moving Support Provision Forward: Next Steps

Implementing a disability process:

Enhancing accessibility while formalizing accommodation

Interpersonal dynamics:

The need for shared accountability and an ability mindset

- Greater attention to practical implementation challenges to improve accessibility while balancing needs across diverse groups
- Greater attention to system-level barriers, including leadership and support cultures in sectors like construction where support provision can create unique challenges

Moving Support Provision Forward: Next Steps

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- Greater attention to system-level barriers, including leadership and support cultures in sectors like construction where support provision can create unique challenges

Interpersonal dynamics:

The need for shared accountability and an ability mindset

- Continued efforts to bring groups with different roles together to improve the timing and responsiveness to disability support requests
- Research to understand current and changing expectations about support provision across organizations
- Research & practice changes to address cultural differences, as well as life course/age, gender, and professional culture perceptions

Strengths & Limitations

- Sample was diverse in their roles, experiences, and sectors served
- Additional groups should be included in future research, e.g., health care professionals, insurers, senior leadership
- A more detailed understanding of context is needed, e.g., job sector
- Research to replicate our findings and apply other methodologies

Takeaway Messages

- Disability support provision is changing – growing in complexity, volume and diversity of requests
- Increased organizational cooperation and efforts are improving accessibility and inclusivity
- New challenges are arising in implementing support and are related to organizational and worker perceptions and expectations
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Thank you

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