

New publication aims to help persons with disabilities achieve more

A new publication aims to help persons with disabilities achieve their full employment potential and serves as a resource for business owners interested in making their operation more inclusive.

The Workforce Development Board / Local Employment Planning Council (WDB/LEPC) – a non-profit organization funded by the federal and provincial governments – worked with more than a dozen agencies and groups serving Peterborough, Northumberland, Kawartha Lakes and Haliburton for the publication entitled ‘Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers.’

Participants in the project included the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, the Canadian Mental Health Association, the Brain Injury Association Peterborough Region, Peterborough Communication and Support Services, Fleming College (Accessible Education Services), the Council for Persons with Disabilities, the area chapter of Community Living, Literacy Ontario Central South, JobQuest, VCCS Employment Services, Watton Employment Services and EPC Peterborough, along with the accessibility co-ordinators for the cities of Peterborough and Kawartha Lakes.

WDB/LEPC staff also attended the Ontario Disability Employment Network’s annual conference in Richmond Hill in October for an opportunity to take part in presentations by leading academics and advocates for persons with disabilities.

“We were absolutely thrilled with the participation from local groups and sincerely hope that the passion and commitment that was on display during the consultation process is evident in

the report,” said project lead Scott Howard.

In light of the broad subject matter, consultations covered an array of related topics. Everything from education and vocational training for students with disabilities to on-the-job supports for employees who acquire a condition later in life.

It quickly became clear that improving the employment prospects of persons with disabilities isn't a challenge that is limited to employers and job-seekers.

“Employers should work to represent their community and accessibility is something we all need to pay more attention to,” said Michael Andrews, executive director of Literacy Ontario Central South.

“We need to start conversations about removing barriers. If it becomes a part of the discourse, change will happen.”

“An accessible community is better for everyone,” added Deb Csumrik of VCCS.

Given the number of factors to be considered – as each individual and organization has different needs and requirements – there's no simple solution to overcoming the barriers facing persons with disabilities.

A key step is realizing that being an inclusive employer means far more than including a mandatory statement in a job posting or installing an entry ramp.

“It's all about removing barriers in our community,” said Jason King, outreach coordinator of Peterborough Council for Persons with Disabilities.

“When you really think about it, we wouldn't even be considered disabled if those barriers didn't exist.”

That includes preconceptions about the limitations of those

with a particular disability.

“Never define someone by their disability,” says Warren Northcott, an employment service specialist with CNIB Peterborough.

Not surprisingly, nearly all of those that took part in the project cited stigma as the biggest barrier facing persons with disabilities from achieving their full employment potential.

“We need to change people’s perceptions and get them to see the abilities in people with disabilities,” adds Tanya Duncan of Peterborough Communication Support Systems (PCSS).

As a whole, project participants had one very simple message for employers. One that was echoed over and over and over again.

“Don’t believe the stereotypes – just give people with disabilities an opportunity,” says Gloria Clark of JobQuest.

The guide, which was funded in part by the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario, features information on four key themes – the barriers facing persons with a disability as they enter or re-enter the workforce, the business case for hiring someone with a disability, the Employment First philosophy and Access Talent, the provincial employment strategy.

It also contains a summary of requirements under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

For more information, or to download a copy of the project, visit [here](#) and click on the ‘News’ tab.