
SHIFTING SYSTEMS: DISABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT

AN ASHOKA CANADA INSIGHT REPORT

Ashoka Canada
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ASHOKA CANADA

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PREFACE

No social challenge exists in isolation. Neither does its resolution. At the very least, attention must be paid to its cultural and historical context as well as its intersection with other challenges. Think for example of the connection between unemployment, poverty, hunger, addiction, homelessness, discrimination, and social isolation. The challenge of employment for people with disabilities (PWD) is not a recent concern. Despite four decades of efforts and substantial financial investments in Canada, PWD continue to face barriers to find and maintain work. The facts are: out of PWD aged 25 to 64 who were neither employed nor in school, 39% (approximately 645,000 people) had the potential to work (Statistics Canada, 2018). At the same time, PWD represent 41% of the low-income population (Statistics Canada, 2017), which underscores this enduring problem.

This report dives into the nexus between disability and employment, showcasing the work of social entrepreneurs (Ashoka Fellows) tackling this issue in their respective countries. While their political, social, and cultural contexts may differ, all of them grasp a vital truth that is too often overlooked: whatever is done in the name of disability and employment must include PWD as the mantra “nothing about us without us” asserts. This is because disability and employment are part of broader issues: ableism, worthiness, capability, and broader economic forces, for example. While work might not be possible for some, everyone’s contribution matters even if it takes on other forms outside of economic productivity. Our fixation on employment opens a debate around worthiness and stratification of whom matters and who does not. The innovations (approaches) captured in this report address the culture shifts required to crack open this way of thinking. Some Ashoka Fellows have done it, and others are relentlessly trying to get there but are hindered by limited support from public and private institutions. Still, their endeavours serve as examples that cultural views towards PWD is the underlying aspect of any material shortcoming. Without a change in habits, attitudes, and beliefs, the sharp distinctive edges of our innovations are in danger of being eroded, isolated, or forgotten.

INTRODUCTION

Employment is widely accepted as having a strong link to overall wellbeing and social inclusion, yet in Canada, people with disabilities (PWD) often struggle to find and keep jobs, or even progress in their careers. Based on a 2021 report from the Quebec Human Rights Commission, the proportion of PWD working in public sector jobs has not changed in over 30 years despite government hiring plans to incentivize employers across the province. Drawing from 2017 data, the Office des personnes handicapées du Québec (2019) reported that 16.1% of people aged 15 and older living in Quebec have a disability, and the proportion increases with age. Given Canada's shifting demographics and the increasing number of older individuals, it is reasonable to anticipate a rise in the employment of PWD by numerous organizations in the future.

Ashoka's mission is to address complex social challenges by identifying, investing in, and amplifying the work of leading social entrepreneurs who bring about innovative and system changing solutions. In Canada, Ashoka Fellows are addressing poverty, promoting inclusion, and building sustainable systems to make Canada a more resilient country. To better understand the complex issue of disability and work, we turned to our global network to learn from Ashoka Fellows who are driving disability inclusions and to capture their insights to support system change efforts in Quebec and Canada. In 2023, we sat down with six Fellows whose innovations centre their lived experiences of disabilities, or their close connection to it, to remove barriers for PWD to truly participate in society. **The purpose of this report is to share insights of six Ashoka Fellows who have committed their lives to promoting disability inclusion and changing the status quo.** In conversation with them, we learned that insisting upon for universal design is critical to address common barriers to participation. This applies to work environments, products, events, and more. About one in seven people worldwide have a disability, and three in seven are connected to them as family members, friends, or supporters. This represents an audience and market that cannot be ignored. Disability inclusion is important for workers with disability, *and* it can open up untapped user/consumer bases as well. Today, the equalizing potential of technologies enhances the possibility of achieving universal design, and these Fellows are at the forefront of a movement for equal participation.



ASHOKA FELLOWS

Gregor Demblin

Austria



Gregor assists companies to harness the potential of PWD as both consumers and employees. He also created Europe's first online career platform for PWD.

The Challenge

In the German-speaking region of Europe (Germany, Austria, Switzerland), around 15% of the population has a disability. A significant proportion of this population experiences higher poverty rates in comparison to their national populations. In Austria, PWD are often segregated within the welfare system, which leads to limited education opportunities and employment in separate subsidized workplaces rather than the mainstream job market.

The Solution

In 2009, Gregor Demblin and Wolfgang Kowatsch, launched Europe's first online career platform for PWD to improve employment opportunities. They soon realized that simply connecting jobs seekers and employers was not enough. In 2014, they co-founded myAbility, a social consulting firm that empowers companies to tap into the potential of PWD as customers and employees. myAbility advises businesses on establishing effective disability management practices, aiming to create a fair and inclusive society within the business community. Along with his team, comprising 35 employees of which 40% have a disability, Gregor uses a business incentive approach when presenting their case to heads of corporations, demonstrating how inclusion can lead to increased access to a wider customer base.

In addition to working with companies, myAbility works directly with PWD to boost their self-confidence, enhance career opportunities, and improve access to employment through the myAbility job board, which has posted over 50,000 jobs for PWD in recent years. As of 2022, Gregor and his team have successfully implemented over 1,000 projects aimed at promoting disability inclusion with 400 companies across Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.



In virtually every department and service that we offer, we have experts with lived experience of disability. Our goal is to build consulting practices in which these individuals can represent themselves rather than being spoken for.

Key Insight

Many businesses fail to recognize PWD as a significant customer base. Focusing on this untapped business segment, we can effectively influence business leaders. Creating a network of organizations that share a commitment to inclusivity serves as a powerful catalyst for generating a critical mass capable of driving social change.

Luis Quintana

Mexico



Luis is fostering a new culture of inclusion for PWD in Mexican society by leveraging consumer power to demand higher standards of accessibility and inclusivity.

The Challenge

In Mexico, PWD face exclusion from society due to physical barriers at work, home, and social spaces. According to reports from 2015, only a few out of the 195 metro stations in Mexico City were accessible for PWD. Despite some infrastructure improvements, limited access to physical and digital infrastructure continues to hinder employment opportunities and social participation.

The Solution

Through his organization, Todo Accessible ("all accessible"), Luis helps businesses become more inclusive. He assesses different aspects of a company, promotes universal design principles, and provides workshops that cover important practices such as emergency protocols for evacuating

PWD. Businesses that meet the evaluation criteria and complete the workshops receive an accessibility rating that goes beyond government standards. These businesses are then listed in a directory that provides detailed information about the most accessible workplaces and public spaces in Mexico, including hotels, restaurants, and bars.

Todo Accessible has been instrumental in fostering an inclusive mindset among the businesses they work with. They have inspired individuals to view the use of accessible spaces as a consumer choice that can drive social change. Their directory is an empowering tool, benefiting not only people with disabilities but also their families and friends. It allows people to make informed consumer decisions by supporting companies that prioritize disability inclusion.



Of course, I need to use a ramp with a slope of 4% to access a building, but so do parents pushing a stroller. The concept of universal design is about creating infrastructure, signalling systems, and digital tools that are accessible not just for people with disabilities but for everyone.

Key Insight

Accessibility is everyone's responsibility, and everyone benefits from universal design; it doesn't mean sacrificing aesthetics or spending too much. By adopting universal design principles, we can include accessible and inclusive features in the design of spaces, projects, information sessions, and more, creating environments where everyone can participate.



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Ryan Gersava

The Philippines



Ryan created a cost-effective and transferable social technology that increase access to employment opportunities in the global digital economy for disadvantaged people.

The Challenge

In the Philippines, a study showed that only 32.5% of the employable adults with disabilities were able to secure jobs, with half of them experiencing underemployment, unpaid family labour, or being self-employed.

The Solution

Virtualahan, the organization that Ryan founded in 2015, has spearheaded the development of a virtual school that enables PWD and other stigmatized people to acquire skills and mindsets required to become successful employees and entrepreneurs in the information and communications technology industry. In doing so, Ryan is breaking down barriers and providing relevant digital-focused job-skills training for roles that can be accomplished remotely.

Since its launch in 2015, 78% of people trained at Virtualahan have found employment in information and communications technology-related jobs, such as digital design, social media marketing, and video editing. Ryan collaborates with local governments to implement the Virtualahan model as social franchises run by PWD and other leaders from marginalized groups. Recently, his team was approached by the federal government to expand Virtualahan programs to all 14 regions of the Philippines; the expansion goes hand-in-hand with a national memorandum that now requires the public sector to facilitate job opportunities for Virtualahan graduates.

“ Because communities took ownership and assumed leadership responsibilities to collaborate on the development of solutions, this became the pivotal lever needed to replicate our initiatives across jurisdictions.

Key Insight

By harnessing the equalizing power of technologies and advocating for policy agendas that prioritize disability inclusion, we can create a more equitable society for PWD.



Photo by © Virtualahan

Ireneusz Białek

Poland



Ireneusz, who lost his sight as a child, paved the way in empowering corporate managers to become catalysts of change after he successfully revamped university policies for inclusion.

The Challenge

In Poland, companies often make statements about valuing diversity on their teams. But in 2016, even the top award-winning employers in the country failed to employ PWD, highlighting the limited understanding of diversity beyond gender and the scarcity of companies with comprehensive inclusion strategies into their business practices.

The Solution

In 2013, Ireneusz founded the MOFFIN foundation, activating managers as change advocates for equal treatment and positive work environments. These “managers of the future” integrate talented individuals despite their differences. Collaborating with multinational organizations like Google, IBM, Cisco, Capgemini, and Roche from 2013 to 2018, MOFFIN promoted inclusion of PWD for the benefit of employees, employers, and Polish society. Ireneusz worked with individuals who demonstrate empathy and openness to start a conversation, rather than teaching business leaders to be more open. This approach is rooted in his own experience, when over 20 years ago, he was appointed to lead the Disability Support Service at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, a service centre that he still leads today.

At Jagiellonian University, Ireneusz pioneered Poland’s first non-discrimination policy for disability in higher education. His team, mainly comprised of PWD, leads one of Europe’s most advanced units focused on providing equal opportunities for students with disabilities. Their pioneering disability awareness training has been disseminated to academic personnel across various universities in Poland and other parts of the European Union.



Removing accessibility barriers in academia and the labour market influences individuals' perception of an organization. Positive experiences lead to reinforcing feedback loops, fostering the adoption of inclusive systems and practices for a welcoming environment for PWD.

Key Insight

Both the physical environment and the people within it play a crucial role in one's experience. If we use the iPhone as an example, it represents a symbol of equal access. To achieve inclusion, universal design must be prioritized, and people must be socialized to advocate, welcome, and implement this adoption.

Gina Badenoch

Mexico & the UK



Gina redefines possibilities for blind and visually impaired people by using sensory experiences to challenge societal expectations towards PWD.

The Challenge

In a world where vision takes centre stage, sighted people often underestimate the unique and powerful abilities of persons who are blind to teach us about the strength of our other senses. Unfortunately, this creates structures and systems in which people with vision impairment of low vision are forced to depend on the sighted for various aspects of life, and perpetuating limited opportunities and negative stereotypes that hinder access to employment prospects.

The Solution

In 2006, Gina founded Sight of Emotion in Mexico and she has since gained international acclaim for reshaping societal attitudes towards PWD. Through innovative approaches of developing photography skills for blind people, and via the use of a diverse range of immersive

sensory experiences to build bridges, Gina empowers both blind and sighted individuals to appreciate the capabilities of PWD. By nurturing photographers who are blind and fostering their confidence, Gina has sparked a transformative shift in how society perceives what PWD can accomplish as opposed to focusing solely on their characteristics of disability.

Through a multitude of impactful events like blindfolded beer tastings, immersive business workshops, and sensory sessions, Gina and her team have curated nearly 400 sensory experiences. These efforts have generated job opportunities for PWD and have also reached an extensive audience of nearly a million people across Mexico, the USA, and Europe. By showcasing the creative work of visually impaired photographers in cultural events and exhibitions, Gina strives to foster a broader understanding that disability is a characteristic in relation to one's environment, and not an obstacle.



People often feel uneasy about hiring individuals with disabilities, assuming that they wouldn't be able to adapt if they themselves had a disability. This unfair assumption overlooks the skills and abilities of the blind and others living with disabilities.



Photo by © Gina Badenoch

Key Insight

Investing in youth with disabilities and fostering inclusivity in schools through universal design is crucial. To ensure society recognizes the potential of people with disabilities, we need to initiate a shift at an early age. By educating youth that disability is shaped by the environment, they can cultivate a deeper understanding and acceptance as they transition into adulthood.

Raúl Lucero

Argentina



Raúl Lucero promotes the integration of PWD into mainstream society by fostering their development and encouraging their autonomy, leading to social independence.

The Challenge

In Argentina, government-funded support for PWD is lacking after the age of 20 or after university education. Beyond small monthly disability allowance, economic prospects are scarce. PWD are often seen as burdens on society, leading to stigma, and institutionalization.

The Solution

Raúl founded Asociación Civil Andar in the 1990s, an organization that provide inclusive learning experiences for PWD. Participants gain valuable expertise through diverse skill development programs in areas like baking, catering, carpentry, and farming, participants gain valuable expertise. Andar goes beyond skill development by offering employment opportunities within the organization and his team continues to win competitive calls for tender to supply baked goods to school and provide services. This empowers PWD at Andar to develop skills, build confidence, and advocate for themselves in seeking career opportunities within established industries.

Over the past three decades, Raúl's work has greatly improved the lives of young adults with disabilities, enhanced their independence and livelihoods. His organization promotes autonomy and encourage PWD to take responsibility for their own lives as much as possible.



Embracing diversity is a catalyst for transformative change, and recognizing individuals based on their merits, rather than their disabilities, is a vital cultural shift that needs to be embraced by all.

Key Insight

Inclusive practices are universal. Across the globe, legislative measures are necessary, but they serve as a preliminary step towards changing societal attitudes. Organizations and businesses are social systems in which significant cultural shift can happen and, when it does, there is potential for trickle-down effects to the consumer base and ultimately the society at large.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Disability knows no boundaries and transcends geographies, cultures, and belief systems. It is part of the human experience, impacting individuals across ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Four out of the six Fellows profiled in this report carry out their work while informed by their lived experience with a disability. All of their innovations are carried out with the goal of disability justice. In practice, disability justice promotes the principle that PWD – like all people – are entitled to have control over their own lives and decisions, and to be included in all aspects of society including employment and even movements for social change. Disability justice also calls for cross-system collaboration and working with allies to generate collective impact; all elements that these Fellows have exemplified in their lifelong pursuits. To positively change systems, disability justice prioritizes the perspectives and priorities of those who are most impacted by the issue at hand. In the closing remarks of his 2020 book, *The Power of Disability*, Ashoka Fellow Al Etmanski tells us that “the experience of disability... reminds us that none of us get where we are going on our own and that success doesn’t come from rising above but rising with.” The innovations of the six Ashoka Fellows profiled in this report give us insight on how to “rise with” so PWD can fully participate in the workforce and society. Here are some key takeaways:

Incorporate Universal Design

The Fellows emphasized the importance of universal design in the development of work environments. Regardless of age, size, ability, or ability, the concept of universal design is about equal participation. This concept goes well beyond mere compliance with specifications; it considers the diverse needs and evolving abilities of users. To adopt this approach, organizations can:

1. Go beyond accessibility standards and guidelines in the design of workplaces, projects, information sessions, digital events, webpages, and more. This is a goal that people should strive for to reduce and remove barriers to participation.

2. Involve individuals with disabilities in decision-making processes to ensure their perspectives are considered when creating inclusive work environments.
3. Provide training and awareness programs for employers and employees, to foster an understanding of universal design principles and to allow them to support their colleagues with disabilities.

Leverage Consumer Power and Market Opportunities

The Fellows highlighted the importance of recognizing PWD as a significant consumer base. By working with businesses to promote professional inclusion, they encourage companies to adopt inclusive measures to increase PWD in their workforce. By doing so, businesses can tap into new market segments and develop more inclusive products and services in their offerings.

Harness the Equalizing Power of Technology

The Fellows recognize the potential of technology in addressing barriers to employment and social inclusion for PWD. Online career platforms and virtual training programs are good ways for PWD to acquire the necessary skills, connect with employers, and ultimately participate in the digital economy.

Nurture a Culture Shift

The Fellows challenge the negative stereotypes and societal attitudes towards PWD. Their innovations foster a culture of inclusion. To reshape perceptions, they assert that a cultural shift is critical to triggering system change. From the Fellows, we learned that the cultural dimension of change can be addressed by leveraging the private sector, and by promoting disability inclusion early so youth can grow and foster such principles as adults.

In sum, the innovations of these Ashoka Fellows exemplify effective strategies, approaches, and solutions for creating inclusive societies by focusing on enhancing employment opportunities for PWD. Their insights can serve as lessons on how to shift from a deficit to a strengths-based perception, and how to move away from the status quo and remove barriers for participation.

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