Inclusive Workplace Case Studies

Innovative Practices in Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Universal Design





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Project Overview

This project aimed to explore how leading organizations across Canada and the United States (US) implement inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility, and Universal Design (IDEA/UD) best practices in the workplace. The goal was to learn from organizations demonstrating strong or innovative approaches and identify practical strategies, implementation experiences, and lessons that may inform the efforts of other employers.

Organizations were recruited through several outreach strategies targeting employers with demonstrated interest or experience in IDEA/UD. Recruitment included direct outreach to the top 100 US companies and all Canadian companies represented in the 2023 Fortune Global 500; outreach to companies receiving a 100 percent score on Disability: IN's 2023 Disability Equality Index; outreach through the National Association of Corporate Directors to organizations that had received its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Awards; announcements distributed through newsletters from the Institute for Work & Health and the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development in Canada; and professional networks of project team members. Professional connections generated the strongest response.

The study initially included both survey and interview components. Because survey participation was limited, the case studies are based primarily on qualitative interviews with organizational representatives responsible for leading or supporting IDEA/UD initiatives. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom between November 2024 and February 2025 and lasted approximately one hour. Questions addressed organizational IDEA/UD vision and strategy; innovative practices in human resources, the built environment, and digital platforms; approaches to measuring progress; perceived outcomes; implementation challenges and responses; and lessons learned. Interview findings were synthesized into case studies highlighting innovative practices, implementation insights, and transferable messages for employers.

Case Study Overview

The case studies are organized by organization size, with participating organizations grouped as small (1 to 99 employees), medium (100 to 499 employees), or large (500 or more employees), based on employee size categories used by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada[1]. The groupings provide a clear overview of the range of organizational contexts represented in the case studies. Each case study follows a consistent structure, beginning with a brief overview of the organization, followed by innovative workplace practices related to inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility, and Universal Design. Implementation insights highlight lessons learned, challenges, and practical considerations, while key messages summarize transferable takeaways for employers seeking to strengthen inclusive workplace practices.



[1] Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada. (2025). *Key small business statistics 2025*. Government of Canada. https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/sme-research-statistics/en/key-small-business-statistics/key-small-business-statistics-2025

INNoVA

Toronto, Ontario, Canada | Business Consulting and Services |
Small (<100 employees) | HR / Digital

About the Organization

INNoVA is a small, remote first accessibility consulting firm whose digital platforms and online communication and collaboration practices effectively function as its primary workplace. Its approach emphasizes proactive personalization, assuming from the beginning that employees have different needs rather than creating a standard process and accommodating exceptions afterward.

Innovative Practices

Starting with yes in accommodation

During onboarding, employees are asked what they need to perform their jobs and feel their best, whether or not they identify or disclose a disability. Possible supports include assistive technology, equipment, changes in schedule, or other individualized arrangements. Employees can also communicate needs through several channels depending on what feels most comfortable. The underlying philosophy is “start with yes,” reducing the burden on employees to repeatedly justify why they need a different way of working.

Providing multiple ways to participate digitally

Employees can participate in meetings through speech, chat, captions, emojis, camera use or no camera use, and other platform features. Informal digital spaces provide opportunities for social connection, while employees can mute or manage communication channels when they become distracting. This approach provides multiple means of participation rather than expecting everyone to engage in one prescribed way.

Integrating wellbeing into ordinary work

Employees have access to wellness coaching during working hours for goals related to mental health, movement, ergonomics, fitness, mobility, and other areas. Flexible benefits also allow employees to use health and wellness resources according to their own priorities.

Implementation Insights

Do not make assumptions about what inclusion looks like

A solution that works well for one employee may not work for another. The organization therefore focuses on offering choices rather than assuming that a particular schedule, platform, or communication style is universally inclusive.

Flexibility can coexist with clear expectations

Employees may use different schedules, technologies, and communication methods while still being responsible for the same work outcomes. This distinction allows flexibility to support inclusion without making expectations unclear.

Remote work needs to be intentionally designed

Remote work removes some physical barriers but does not automatically create inclusion. Meeting norms, communication platforms, informal social interaction, technology, and employee wellbeing all need to be considered. INNoVA's experience suggests that connection can be supported when employees are given several comfortable ways to participate rather than being required to reproduce an office environment online.

Build inclusion into how the organization works

At INNoVA, inclusion is built into everyday ways of working rather than treated as a separate equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) activity. Flexibility, accessibility, and responsiveness to individual needs are part of how the organization communicates, onboards employees, provides support, and structures work. In this way, inclusion becomes part of how the organization operates rather than an added initiative. INNoVA also identified an opportunity to make the connection between some of these practices and its broader EDI goals more explicit when useful.

Key Messages for Employers

1. Start with yes and offer choices before employees need to ask for exceptions. Small employers often have the flexibility to personalize work arrangements without creating complicated processes.

2. Keep expectations consistent while allowing different ways to meet them. Flexibility does not require lowering performance expectations.

3. Design remote work intentionally. Multiple communication modes, accessible platforms, and flexible participation can make digital workplaces more inclusive.

INSTITUTE FOR WORK & HEALTH (IWH)

Toronto, Ontario, Canada | Research | Small (<100 employees) | HR

About the Organization

The Institute for Work & Health (IWH) is a relatively small research organization with a highly educated professional workforce and limited dedicated equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) infrastructure. Its formal EDI efforts grew directly from employee feedback and developed into a representative committee structure focused on policies, employee needs, and learning.

Innovative Practices

Using a representative EDI committee to organize the work

IWH created a EDI committee with employees from different job levels and functions and organized the work into three areas: policies and procedures, needs assessment, and education and awareness. The committee provides a structure through which employee concerns can be translated into recommendations for leadership.

Developing an organization specific EDI survey

The committee developed its own survey examining employees' experiences of hierarchy, career development, hiring, compensation, microaggressions, discrimination, and other aspects of workplace culture. Survey findings are reviewed by leadership and used to identify areas for improvement. One important finding was that some employees reported through the anonymous survey that they had experienced microaggressions or other concerning behaviors, but had not raised those incidents through available organizational channels when they occurred. This highlighted the importance of creating reporting options that employees feel comfortable using, particularly in a small organization where maintaining confidentiality can be more difficult.

Translating employee input into policy change

Committee work contributed to updates to pregnancy and parental leave policies so they better reflected different employment arrangements, fathers, same sex couples, and contemporary family structures. Broader human resources improvements also included clearer policies and greater salary transparency, giving employees better information about responsibilities, processes, and opportunities for compensation progression.

Implementation Insights

Visible change builds credibility

Employees need to see that providing feedback leads to something tangible. Policy changes and other improvements help demonstrate that surveys and committees are connected to actual organizational decisions. For a small organization, even a few visible changes can strengthen trust in the broader process.

Psychological safety also matters inside the EDI process

Committee members initially worried about saying the wrong thing or speaking candidly about sensitive issues, particularly when senior staff were present. The group developed *rules of*

engagement that emphasized openness, positive intent, and respectful discussion. These shared expectations helped make difficult conversations more manageable.

Small organizations need to think differently about confidentiality
Employees may hesitate to report concerns because anonymity can feel difficult in a small workplace where people know one another. This means employers should not interpret a small number of complaints as proof that employees are not experiencing problems.

Use external resources instead of trying to become experts in everything
IWH uses outside resources and professional organizations to supplement internal knowledge. For a small organization, this allows employees to focus on applying good practices rather than building specialized expertise for every EDI topic.

Key Messages for Employers

1. Start with a representative employee structure. A small organization can begin with a committee and clear terms of reference rather than creating a large EDI office.
2. Turn feedback into visible changes. Employees are more likely to trust surveys and committees when they can see concrete results.
3. Create psychological safety for participation. Reporting systems and committees only work when employees feel comfortable speaking honestly.

TOURISM HR CANADA

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada | Tourism Workforce Development and Research |
Small (<100 employees) | HR / Digital

About the Organization

Tourism HR Canada is a small nonprofit organization that supports workforce development and inclusion across Canada's tourism sector. Although it has considerable external expertise in workforce inclusion, its internal equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) infrastructure is relatively informal, so inclusive practices are embedded mainly through flexible work, employee specific arrangements, accessible communications, and external accessibility expertise.

Innovative Practices

Using flexible work as an everyday inclusion practice

Tourism HR Canada uses flexibility in where and when employees work as part of its everyday workplace approach. Employees can work from home or the office and adjust their working hours based on individual needs, as long as project responsibilities are maintained. Team members coordinate meeting times with one another to make these arrangements work in practice. This flexibility is complemented by wellness supports, including dedicated funding for employee wellness expenses and access to an Employee Assistance Program. The organization reported positive employee feedback on its flexible work policy, open communication, and workplace arrangements that respond to individual needs.

Using external expertise for a digital accessibility audit

An external consultant reviewed websites, training related content, communications, branding, color contrast, and other digital materials. Recommendations led to updates in webpages, fonts, logos, and branding guidance. The process also served as a learning opportunity for staff, showing how a small organization without an internal accessibility specialist can use focused external expertise to create tangible improvements.

Individualizing workplace setup

Accessibility and employee needs were considered during office relocation and renovation. The workplace provides sufficient circulation space, adjustable workstations, different chair options, and computer and monitor setups based on employee needs. The approach supports flexibility and personalization by allowing workplace setups to respond to different employee needs rather than assuming that one standard configuration will work equally well for everyone.

Implementation Insights

Small organizations can advance inclusion through shared responsibility

Tourism HR Canada has a small staff and does not have a dedicated human resources or EDI position. Its experience highlights the importance of treating inclusion as a shared organizational responsibility rather than assigning it to one person or department. Leaders and employees across the organization can each play a role in supporting inclusive practices.

External expertise can build internal capacity

The digital accessibility audit not only identified barriers but also provided practical recommendations that helped staff better understand how to improve accessibility in communications and design. For small employers, bringing in external expertise for a specific task can be a practical way to address immediate needs while also building staff knowledge and capacity over time.

Inclusion does not always require a formal program

Tourism HR Canada does not organize all of its inclusion efforts under a single formal EDI program. Instead, inclusive practices are reflected across everyday workplace arrangements, accessibility improvements, staff learning, and other organizational activities. Its experience shows that small employers can advance inclusion through practical actions even without a dedicated EDI program or formal organizational structure.

Key Messages for Employers

1. Make inclusion a shared responsibility. Small organizations can advance inclusion by engaging leadership and employees rather than relying on one dedicated specialist.

2. Use external expertise strategically. Targeted audits or consultations can help small employers improve accessibility and build internal knowledge without requiring a full time specialist.

3. Build flexibility into everyday work. Flexible hours, work location, equipment, and workstation configuration are practical inclusion strategies for small employers.

CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF PITTSBURGH

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA | Museums | Medium (100-499 employees) | Built Env.

About the Organization

Children's Museum of Pittsburgh combines museum operations, exhibit design, learning, and research within a relatively small organization. Its long experience applying Universal Design (UD) to visitor environments, especially through MuseumLab, has increasingly influenced how staff think about employee spaces and everyday workplace practices.

Innovative Practices

Designing flexible workplaces that offer choice

MuseumLab provides employees with a variety of work settings rather than a single standard environment. Spaces include open collaborative areas, smaller rooms, semi private settings, flexible furniture, generous circulation, natural light, clear wayfinding, and consistent controls. Teams can quickly rearrange furniture as their needs change, and employees can choose spaces according to the type of work they are doing. This makes *flexibility and choice* central features of the workplace rather than requiring every employee to adapt to one setting.

Using MuseumLab as a living laboratory

MuseumLab functions as a *living laboratory* where the organization can test accessible design approaches and learn from how they work in practice. Staff observations and experimentation have led to solutions such as symbol based signage and clearer visual instructions. Successful ideas can then be shared through the Accessibility and Inclusion Committee and applied elsewhere. The newer environment can also expose barriers in older spaces. For example, having an adult changing table at MuseumLab made the absence of a comparable facility in another building more visible and prompted efforts to address the gap.

Embedding UD into routine design practice

UD is incorporated into orientation, design guidance, staff learning, and expectations for new exhibits and projects. The cross departmental Accessibility and Inclusion Committee helps employees raise issues and share solutions across different parts of the organization. This helps make accessibility and UD an ongoing, shared organizational practice rather than something that depends on one specialist or a single renovation project.

Implementation Insights

Flexibility can support both adaptability and employee choice

The museum found that flexibility can support both organizational adaptability and employee choice. Spaces that can be easily reconfigured help accommodate changes in teams and activities without major physical changes, while providing different types of work settings allows employees to choose environments that better fit their tasks, preferences, and needs.

Small experiments can become organization wide practices

Many improvements begin with observation, trial and error, and staff experimentation rather than large formal initiatives. When a solution works, the Accessibility and Inclusion Committee provides

a way to share it and turn an isolated idea into a broader practice. This shows how organization wide improvements can grow from practical solutions that are tested, shared, and expanded over time.

UD still depends on everyday behavior
A well-designed environment can become less accessible and inclusive if furniture is moved into circulation paths or staff do not understand why particular features matter. Employee turnover adds to this challenge. UD therefore needs to be reinforced through orientation, shared expectations, and routine practice, not only through physical design.

New environments can become benchmarks for older spaces
MuseumLab demonstrated what was possible when UD was considered early. Older buildings are more difficult and costly to retrofit, but the newer environment gives staff a practical benchmark for identifying where future improvements are needed.

Key Messages for Employers

1. Provide choices rather than one standard workspace. Different settings can support different work styles, sensory preferences, and tasks.
2. Treat the workplace as a living laboratory. Small organizations can test ideas, observe what works, and gradually spread successful solutions.
3. Make UD part of routine work. UD is more sustainable when staff understand and maintain inclusive practices rather than treating them as features of a one time renovation.

UNILAND DEVELOPMENT COMPANY

Amherst, New York, USA | Real Estate | Medium (100-499 employees) | Built Env.

About the Organization

Uniland is a real estate development and property management company with in house design and construction expertise. Its workplace approach is pragmatic, with Universal Design (UD) considered as part of renovation and workplace improvement projects.

Innovative Practices

Creating a flexible secondary workplace

An underused employee break room was substantially expanded and redesigned with natural light, movable furniture, several seating types, accessible circulation, and areas for individual work, meetings, training, and social activities. The space became much more than a lunchroom. Employees now use it as a secondary workplace for laptop work, seminars, meetings, training, and informal interaction.

Using intuitive zoning to support flexibility

Movable furniture provides flexibility, but it can also create accessibility problems if circulation routes become obstructed as furniture moves. Uniland addressed this through zoning that naturally guides how the space is used. Material changes and layout cues help define areas for table seating, lounge seating, a game area, and counter seating along the perimeter. Employees can rearrange furniture within these areas while the overall organization of the space remains clear.

Using targeted employee input to solve practical problems

Instead of asking employees broad questions about inclusion, the design team asked about specific problems with their workspaces. Feedback from the receptionist informed changes to storage, desk location, privacy, lighting, visitor visibility, and desk height. Employee concerns about making private calls in an open office also led to installation of an enclosed phone and meeting booth. These focused conversations produced practical changes that could be incorporated directly into the renovation.

Implementation Insights

Integrate UD when workplaces are designed or updated

Existing buildings present real constraints, and cost remains an important consideration. At Uniland, fixed building conditions limited some changes, while improvements with greater cost implications had to be balanced with project priorities and budgets. A major lesson is that Universal Design does not necessarily require a separate project or substantial added cost. Some improvements, such as greater flexibility, wider circulation where feasible, and healthier material choices, can be incorporated into the scope of planned projects with little or no additional cost. Other improvements can be introduced as spaces are renovated or updated over time. This allows organizations to make progress toward more inclusive workplaces while working within existing building and budget constraints.

Flexibility works best with clear zoning
Highly flexible spaces can become confusing or inaccessible if everything can move anywhere. Uniland's zoning approach allows employees to rearrange spaces while preserving circulation and organization. The lesson is not to choose between flexibility and structure, but to use clear spatial cues that allow both to coexist.

Ask employees about the task, not only about accessibility
Targeted conversations about specific work problems produced useful design information that could be directly incorporated into workplace improvements. Asking questions such as “What makes this task difficult?” or “What is missing from this space?” can help identify opportunities to better support people in completing their tasks within the work environment.

Key Messages for Employers

1. Use workplace design and updates as opportunities for UD. Many inclusive features can be incorporated into planned projects with little or no additional cost.
2. Combine flexibility with clear zoning. Adaptable spaces work best when spatial cues help keep furniture organized and circulation clear.
3. Ask employees about practical work challenges. Focused questions about tasks and spaces can reveal useful opportunities for improvement.

CBC / RADIO-CANADA

Toronto, Ontario, Canada | Broadcast Media Production and Distribution |
Large (5,000+ employees) | HR

About the Organization

CBC / Radio Canada is a large national broadcaster with employees working across regions, languages, occupations, and business units. Its equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) approach has evolved from broad corporate commitments toward more targeted strategies and employment pathways designed around the needs of specific underrepresented communities.

Innovative Practices

Using a matching development fund to create shared responsibility

The EDI Development Fund provides financial support for the professional development of employees from underrepresented groups to pursue training, leadership development, and other career opportunities. The employee's manager is expected to contribute matching funds from the operational budget available within their station or business unit rather than relying entirely on the central EDI budget. This creates *shared responsibility* for employee development. Central funding can help open an opportunity, while the employee's manager or business unit also invests directly in the development opportunity.

Building pathways from recruitment to advancement

CBC has developed targeted programs that address different points along the employment pathway for groups that remain underrepresented. The Indigenous Pathways into Journalism program creates an entry point for people who may not come through traditional journalism education or experience. Participants receive paid work experience together with additional support intended to help them move into employment. The Developing Emerging Leaders program supports employees from equity deserving groups as they move from early career roles toward leadership. CBC also developed an on air talent program for people with disabilities and complemented the training with a listening party where managers from across the organization could hear participants' recorded work and become familiar with potential new on air talent. Together, these programs show an effort to build pathways that extend beyond recruitment by supporting entry, development, visibility, advancement, and retention.

Connecting data with leadership accountability

CBC tracks representation and employee experience across recruitment, leadership, retention, promotion, and engagement. Information is regularly reviewed by senior leaders, and representation related hiring measures have also been incorporated into management accountability systems.

Implementation Insights

Recruitment is only the first step

Bringing underrepresented people into an organization is only one part of building an inclusive workforce. Recruitment and training need to connect with development, visibility, advancement, and retention so that one opportunity can lead meaningfully to the next. CBC's experience

suggests that these efforts are stronger when they operate as connected pathways rather than isolated programs, with attention to what happens after each intervention ends.

Seed funding can help initiatives become part of normal business
Central accessibility or EDI funds can help a new program get started, but long term sustainability improves when ongoing initiatives move from temporary central funding into regular departmental budgets. This helps ensure that inclusion is not financed only by the EDI office, but becomes a shared organizational responsibility that departments sustain through their own work and resources.

Focused strategies can complement shared EDI goals
CBC maintains broader EDI goals while also developing dedicated strategies for particular communities, including an Accessibility Plan and a National Indigenous Strategy. These strategies help CBC address barriers that are specific to particular communities while still supporting the organization's broader inclusion goals. An important part of this approach is involving people with relevant lived experience from the beginning. CBC involved employees with disabilities and broader community members in developing its Accessibility Plan, while Indigenous people were directly involved in shaping the Indigenous Strategy.

Measure organization wide progress and program outcomes separately
While CBC tracks broader changes in workforce representation, engagement, promotion, and retention to understand overall organizational progress, program specific measures can provide a different level of insight by helping assess how particular initiatives contribute to those broader outcomes. Measurement can also strengthen accountability. CBC shares workforce metrics with senior leadership and includes new hire representation in management performance incentives, helping keep inclusion goals visible within leadership decision making.

Key Messages for Employers

1. Do not stop at diverse recruitment. Think about development, visibility, advancement, and retention as one connected employment pathway.
2. Share responsibility for employee development. Managers can actively invest in employee development alongside central EDI or HR support, helping make inclusion a shared responsibility rather than the work of one department.
3. Match strategies to specific barriers. Different communities may face different barriers to entry, development, visibility, or advancement, so focused strategies can complement broader EDI goals.

HAMILTON HEALTH SCIENCES (HHS)

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada | Hospitals and Health Care |
Large (5,000+ employees) | HR

About the Organization

Hamilton Health Sciences (HHS) is a very large health system with multiple hospitals, clinical environments, professional groups, and work schedules. Because a small central equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) function cannot directly reach every unit, its emerging approach emphasizes distributed capacity through data, embedded specialists, EDI Champions, communities of practice, and leadership support.

Innovative Practices

Collecting equity data with a clear purpose

HHS was preparing to introduce voluntary employee equity data collection through its human resources (HR) system to better understand workforce composition. The information was intended to inform recruitment and retention strategies, future affinity groups, and other EDI priorities. Before collecting the data, a working group considered what questions the organization wanted the information to answer and how it would be used in practice. This approach helps ensure that demographic data are connected to specific organizational decisions and priorities rather than collected simply because an organization believes it should have them.

Using Human Rights support to connect individual concerns with broader learning

The Human Rights team supports employees and managers dealing with concerns such as microaggressions, discrimination, harassment, power differences, and workplace conflict. Support can include helping employees understand formal and informal options, work through their experiences, identify possible resolutions, and restore workplace relationships. When cases point to broader or recurring issues, the team may also provide targeted education to teams and leaders to help prevent similar problems in the future.

Creating a scale and spread model through local champions

Because a small central EDI team cannot directly support every site and team across HHS, the organization is building distributed capacity through embedded health equity specialists, EDI Champions, and communities of practice. Embedded specialists work directly with local teams and build relationships over time. At McMaster Children's Hospital, this engagement led managers to request their own EDI Community of Practice, showing how local interest can grow from direct support rather than relying only on centrally led initiatives. EDI Champions also help extend the reach of the central team by sharing information, resources, and emerging practices with their own departments. Together, these approaches create a scale and spread model in which EDI knowledge and practice can move across the organization through trusted local people and networks.

Implementation Insights

Relationships are part of the implementation infrastructure

In a large organization, EDI cannot spread through policy documents or email alone. Direct conversations with managers and clinical teams help the EDI team understand their priorities, responsibilities, and constraints while developing a shared language around EDI. These relationships also help identify where EDI goals connect with work that teams are already responsible for. Over time, this can build trust and local ownership rather than making EDI feel like an additional requirement coming from a central office.

Use trusted local messengers to scale change
EDI Champions and embedded specialists can extend the reach of a small central EDI team by working directly with different sites and departments. Because they understand the priorities, roles, and working conditions of their local teams, they can help translate organization wide EDI goals into practices that are relevant to each setting.
This *scale and spread* approach is particularly useful in large organizations where employees work in very different roles or environments.

Training must fit operational realities
Mandatory education can be difficult in healthcare because training time may take staff away from direct patient care. Instead of assuming everyone can participate in the same way, implementation needs to account for work schedules, staffing requirements, and the different ways employees access information.

Inclusive recruitment needs an inclusive destination
Improving recruitment without preparing the workplace to support and retain new employees can create a *bridge to nowhere*. Recruitment efforts therefore need to be connected with onboarding, leadership capability, employee support, and workplace culture.

Key Messages for Employers

1. Decide how you will use equity data before collecting it. A few purposeful questions can be more useful than a large data collection effort without a clear plan.
2. Build EDI Champions and trusted local partners. Small central teams can expand their reach by building a network of people across the organization who understand the goals and can apply them locally.
3. Connect recruitment with inclusion and retention. Hiring people from underrepresented groups is not enough if managers and workplace systems are not prepared to support them.

UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

Guelph, Ontario, Canada | Higher Education | Large (1,000+ employees) | HR / Digital

About the Organization

The University of Guelph is a large public university where accessibility is shaped by both employment equity requirements and provincial accessibility legislation in Ontario. Its approach is increasingly moving beyond individual accommodation and compliance toward more proactive, system level accessibility through workforce planning, digital accessibility, procurement, training, and institutional governance.

Innovative Practices

Using workforce data to inform recruitment and representation

The university conducts a workforce analysis every two years to compare representation of equity deserving groups, including people with disabilities, with labor market availability across 14 occupational groups. The analysis identifies representation gaps that can help inform recruitment priorities. During individual searches, applicants can voluntarily self-identify through an Applicant Tracking Questionnaire. If an applicant pool does not have sufficient diversity, the university may recommend expanding or re advertising the search to attract a broader pool of candidates.
This creates a more systematic link between employment equity goals and recruitment decisions by using workforce and applicant data to identify where broader outreach may be needed.

Building practical digital accessibility capacity

The Digital Accessibility Resource Centre provides guidance, training, newsletters, and support for creating accessible documents and digital content. The university is also working to improve practices around PDFs, presentations, tables, plain language, and web content across a highly decentralized institution. A key part of this approach is *practical training*. Teaching employees how to make a PowerPoint, PDF, or other document accessible gives them a concrete skill they can apply immediately, which may be more useful than adding more general awareness training.

Moving accessibility upstream through procurement

The university is increasingly looking at procurement as a way to prevent barriers before they occur. Examples include selecting classroom furniture that accommodates wheelchair users and expecting software to include accessible features such as captioning rather than purchasing products first and addressing accessibility later. This reflects a broader Universal Design approach of considering diverse user needs from the outset, reducing the need for later modifications or retrofits.

Implementation Insights

Build shared responsibility across a decentralized organization

Different university units are responsible for different aspects of accessibility, such as the built environment, workplace accommodations, digital accessibility, and teaching. In a highly decentralized institution, however, these efforts can become siloed, making it difficult for units to know what others are doing or coordinate their work. The university is addressing this challenge through collaborative groups, communities of practice, and an accessibility steering committee

that brings together representatives from across administrative departments. A broader goal is to strengthen *shared responsibility*, so that accessibility is coordinated across the institution rather than addressed separately by individual offices.

Use audits to turn individual barriers into priorities
Historic buildings and long capital planning cycles make physical improvements difficult to complete quickly. A comprehensive accessibility audit gives the university a clearer evidence base for determining which barriers should be addressed first and for incorporating accessibility into future capital planning. This helps shift physical accessibility from a series of individual requests toward a more systematic and prioritized approach.

Streamline training and focus on what employees can use
A large institution can accumulate many required and voluntary training programs. Too many overlapping courses can create training fatigue without necessarily changing behavior. The university has recognized the value of simplifying training and emphasizing practical skills that employees can apply directly.

Strong activity does not automatically mean measurable outcomes
The university has many accessibility initiatives, but systematic evidence about their effect on employee experience remains limited. Disability disclosure is voluntary, accommodation records do not represent the full population of employees with disabilities, and existing data do not provide a complete picture of accessibility outcomes. The university is beginning to address this gap by incorporating stronger measurement into its next accessibility planning process and participating in a cross institutional working group focused on accessibility data. These efforts are intended to build a clearer evidence base for understanding progress and informing future priorities.

Key Messages for Employers

1. Move accessibility upstream. Include accessibility when selecting furniture, software, services, and other products rather than repeatedly retrofitting them later.
2. Make training practical. Small and medium sized employers can focus on a few skills employees regularly need, such as creating accessible documents, rather than developing a large training curriculum.
3. Use audits and simple measures to guide priorities. Organizations do not need to address every barrier at once. Identify recurring problems, prioritize them, and track whether changes are improving the employee experience.

VANASSE HANGEN BRUSTLIN, INC. (VHB)

Watertown, Massachusetts, USA | Civil Engineering |
Large (1,000+ employees) | HR / Built Env.

About the Organization

Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) is a large engineering, planning, design, and science firm with offices across multiple locations and a substantial hybrid workforce. Inclusion is closely connected to both its People and Culture systems and its professional design work, creating an organizational approach in which accessibility, flexibility, and belonging are intended to be embedded across everyday business practices.

Innovative Practices

Designing workplace choice into offices and leasing decisions

Newer VHB offices provide different types of settings for quiet work, collaboration, and different employee preferences. Facilities staff also consider neurodiversity and accessibility as spaces are redesigned. Because many offices are leased, accessibility is increasingly considered during site selection rather than only after a lease is signed. Facilities teams also look at inclusive restrooms, flexible environments, and technology that allows remote employees to participate effectively.

Creating a consistent accommodation process

VHB uses an independent third party service to review employee accommodation requests rather than leaving decisions solely to individual managers. The third party reviews the relevant information and helps determine appropriate accommodations based on the employee's needs. This approach combines individualization with procedural consistency. Employees can receive accommodations tailored to their needs, while VHB maintains a structured system intended to promote fairness across managers and offices. It can also reduce the risk that a request is handled differently because of an individual manager's assumptions, experience, or understanding of disability.

Connecting employee resource groups with learning and employee driven change

VHB uses employee resource groups not only to build community, but also to support learning, bring forward employee needs, and connect inclusion with professional practice. For example, a disability inclusion lunch and learn brought in an advocate from the Perkins School for the Blind to share lived experiences of blindness, accessibility technology, and everyday barriers. The session was paired with a presentation from a VHB employee describing accessibility work on a real design project. This approach makes inclusion visible through real people, projects, and experiences, rather than relying only on general awareness training. Employee input has also contributed to new groups focused on needs such as elder care and the transition toward retirement, showing how employee resource groups can respond to emerging workforce needs and create new forms of support.

Implementation Insights

Inclusion works best when it is embedded rather than added on

VHB's approach connects equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) with human resources (HR), facilities, learning, health and safety, communications, marketing, and leadership rather than positioning it as the responsibility of one specialist. This makes inclusive practices part of organizational systems and everyday decision making.

Showing practical examples can be more effective than telling
Learning experiences that combine lived experience with the company's own professional work make accessibility relevant to employees' everyday roles. Rather than relying only on mandatory training, VHB emphasizes *showing* how inclusion relates to real people, projects, communities, and professional responsibilities.

Consider accessibility before the organization commits to a space
Leased offices create significant limitations. Shared restrooms, stairs, elevators, and other building features may be outside the company's control. Including accessibility in leasing decisions gives the organization more influence before those constraints become fixed.

Hybrid work changed the purpose of the office
VHB is redesigning offices to give employees a reason to come in for collaboration and connection rather than relying only on attendance requirements. The office therefore needs to provide something different from home, including varied settings, strong technology, accessible meetings, and opportunities for interaction.

Key Messages for Employers

1. Build inclusion into how the organization operates. Rather than treating inclusion as a separate initiative, incorporate it into everyday systems such as hiring, accommodations, benefits, workplace design, learning, and management.
2. Use practical examples and lived experience to build awareness. Employees may understand accessibility more easily when they can see how it connects to real work.
3. Consider accessibility and Universal Design early. Evaluating a space before signing a lease can help employers identify whether it will support a wider range of employee needs and reduce barriers that may be difficult to address later.

WORKPLACE SAFETY AND INSURANCE BOARD (WSIB)

Toronto, Ontario, Canada | Workers' Compensation and Workplace Safety |
Large (1,000+ employees) | Built Env. / Digital

About the Organization

Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) is Ontario's workplace safety and workers compensation organization, serving workers who may experience injury or disability and supporting their recovery and return to work. Because accessibility is closely connected to its mandate, WSIB has increasingly moved beyond minimum compliance toward a more proactive inclusive design approach, using employee lived experience, accessibility standards, testing, and practical guidance to improve physical spaces, digital systems, procurement, and workplace practices.

Innovative Practices

Employees with disabilities as ongoing design partners

WSIB uses an Accessibility Advisory Council made up of employees with disabilities and assistive technology users as an ongoing source of lived experience expertise. Council members review workplace changes, test digital tools and learning materials, contribute to purchasing decisions, and participate in physical accessibility reviews. Employees may also take part in workplace walkthroughs to evaluate the accessibility of physical spaces, using the mobility devices or other supports they use in daily life. This helps the team understand how the space works for employees in practice and identify barriers that might otherwise be missed. The distinctive feature is that employees with disabilities are treated as ongoing partners throughout design and implementation, rather than being consulted only after a barrier has already been created.

Going beyond digital compliance and building accessibility into procurement

WSIB combines technical accessibility testing with functional usability testing. Employees who use assistive technology test systems while completing the actual tasks required in their jobs, helping identify barriers that technical compliance testing alone may miss. External accessibility specialists supplement this testing when additional expertise is needed. Accessibility expectations are also incorporated into contracts and purchasing decisions. Vendors can be held accountable when products do not meet agreed accessibility requirements. This moves accessibility earlier in the process by building it into what the organization buys instead of repairing inaccessible systems after implementation.

Creating environments employees can adjust themselves

Redesigned workplaces include adjustable workstations and selected spaces with additional options for lighting and environmental conditions. Physical space planning also goes beyond mobility access to consider neurodivergence and sensory processing, including noise, visual distractions, lighting, tactile information, and wayfinding. Employee feedback helps facilities staff recognize that a space can technically meet accessibility requirements while still being difficult to use or concentrate in. The broader Universal Design (UD) goal is to create environments that employees can adjust themselves, reducing the need to treat every difference in workspace or sensory need as an individual accommodation.

Implementation Insights

Co-design helped shift attitudes from risk avoidance toward collaboration

Some teams were initially hesitant to involve employees with disabilities before a product or program was complete because they worried that exposing problems could create complaints or organizational risk. Repeated collaboration through the Accessibility Advisory Council showed that employees usually wanted to help improve the solution and often identified practical changes that were relatively easy to address. These experiences helped demystify accessibility and showed teams that meaningful improvements do not always require major redesign or added cost.

Start with motivated teams and use them to build momentum

Accessibility practices are not equally mature across WSIB. Some units actively seek guidance on topics such as neurodivergent inclusion, while others still struggle with more basic practices such as consistent captioning. Rather than waiting for the entire organization to reach the same level of readiness, the accessibility team works with motivated departments that can test new approaches and demonstrate their value to others. These accessibility champions provide practical examples that can be shared across the organization.

Turn individual solutions into practical guidance

Physical accessibility improvements initially grew partly from individual barriers, employee feedback, and accommodation experiences. WSIB has captured these lessons in its *Physical Space Reference Guide*, which can inform future workplace projects and continues to be updated as new issues and design considerations emerge. This helps move the organization from repeatedly fixing individual barriers toward preventing similar barriers in the first place.

Sustained leadership is important for broader employment inclusion

While WSIB has made progress in physical space, digital accessibility, and procurement, repeated changes in senior human resources (HR) leadership made it more difficult to sustain momentum on employment inclusion initiatives, as relationships, priorities, and support had to be rebuilt. Employees with disabilities also continued to report weaker experiences related to career development, advancement, inclusion, and belonging. Sustained progress across physical, digital, and employment inclusion therefore requires consistent leadership, inclusive management practices, and continued attention to equitable employment opportunities.

Key Messages for Employers

1. Involve employees early and repeatedly. Treat employees with disabilities as lived experience experts who can contribute to design, testing, purchasing, and workplace planning before barriers are created.

2. Build accessibility champions and use practical examples. Start with motivated teams, demonstrate what works, and use those examples to help accessibility spread across the organization.

3. Turn what you learn into repeatable practice. Small and medium sized employers can capture successful solutions in a simple workplace guide, purchasing checklist, or digital accessibility resource so the same barriers do not have to be solved repeatedly.