



ESYD

BC Employment Strategy for Youth with Disabilities

Employment Support for Youth with Disabilities: Youth Perspective on Gaps, Barriers, and Best Practices

2022 Focus Group Report



Disclaimer

The following report was prepared by the Provincial Employment Strategy for Youth with Disabilities project team of CanAssist at the University of Victoria. It contains summaries of the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of two small groups of youth with disabilities from BC who participated in our focus group sessions.

CanAssist at the University of Victoria

CARSA, PO Box 1700, STN CSC

Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2

Phone: 250-721-7300

Website: <https://www.canassist.ca/EN/main/esyd.html>

Email: youthstratlead@uvic.ca

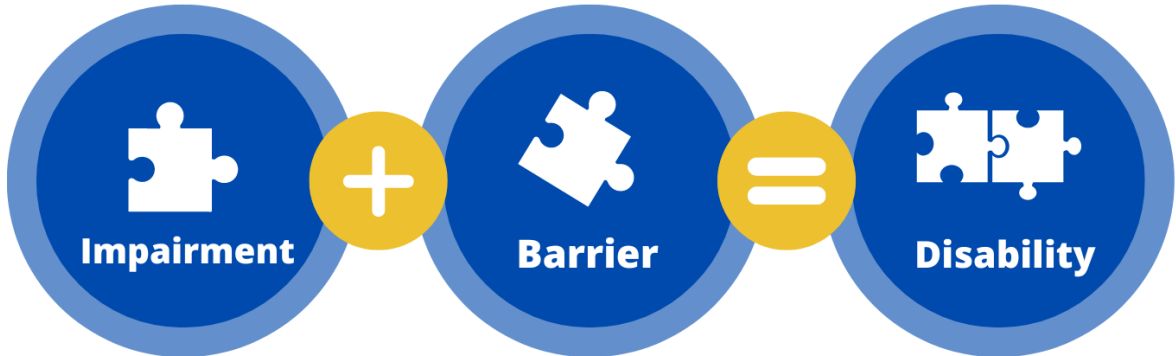
Table of Contents

Definitions.....	3
Executive Summary	4
Gaps, Barriers, and Best Practices.....	5
Introduction	6
Youth Focus Groups.....	7
Recruitment and Participants	8
Nominal Group Technique	9
Group 1: Top Gaps and Barriers	10
Workplace Stigma and Discrimination	10
Rigid Work Schedules and Inaccessible Job Postings.....	11
Difficult to Balance Work and Life.....	11
Limited Sick Days	12
Limited Opportunities to Learn.....	12
Group 2: Top Best Practices	13
Supportive Work Environment	13
Mental Health Days	14
Access to Secondary Education and Skills Training	14
Career Engagement	14
On Going Support from Employers	15
Conclusion	16

Definitions

This section describes key terms, as understood in the context of this report.

Youth with disabilities describes young people between 15-30 who live, learn and work in a variety of community settings across BC. This includes those who attend school or distributed learning programs, vocational training programs, and/or post-secondary education/programs. It also includes those who are employed, underemployed, or unemployed.



Impairment describes a reduction or loss of ability impacting physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory function. Impairments can be permanent, temporary, or episodic.

A **barrier** is an obstacle that prevents someone from accessing and navigating employment support. Barriers can be caused by environments, attitudes, practices, policies, information, communications, and technologies. They are often exacerbated by intersecting forms of discrimination.

Disability means an inability to participate fully and equally in the workforce due to the interaction between an impairment and a barrier. By this definition, mental health and substance use challenges can lead to disability.

A **gap** the absence of something needed for employment support. It also describes the inability to access something needed.

Executive Summary

The Provincial Employment Strategy project team at CanAssist at the University of Victoria is developing the *Provincial Employment Strategy for Youth with Disabilities*. This strategy will provide the framework for a more consistent approach to supporting youth with disabilities in their employment in BC. It will be grounded in a set of guiding principles that highlight best practice for supporting youth-specific needs.

With support and guidance from a Provincial Network of Stakeholders, the project team is consulting the following groups to understand the gaps, barriers, and best practices in the current employment support landscape:

- *Youth with disabilities*
- *Caregivers of youth with disabilities*
- *Employment service providers*
- *Teachers/educators*
- *Employers*

The strategy will address gaps and barriers and highlight best practices.

In the Spring of 2022, the project team hosted focus groups with 14 youth participants from across the province. These youth were split into two groups of seven. One group explored the gaps and barriers faced in the employment journey and the other explored best practices. See the next page for an overview of the findings.

The findings presented in this report informed the development of a larger scale survey that was issued to youth across the province.



Gaps and Barriers



Figure 1: Gaps and barriers experienced in the current employment support landscape

Best Practices



Figure 2: Best practices in the current employment support landscape

Introduction

Youth with disabilities face many barriers to employment. They also struggle to access appropriate employment support. This is because the availability and accessibility of employment programs vary from place to place. Different programs are available in different communities across BC. And each of these programs have different rules for who they can serve based on how they are funded. To further complicate things, most programs are designed for adults, who have different needs than youth. It is difficult for youth with disabilities to get the help they need to get a job and keep it.

There is opportunity to improve employment support for youth with disabilities in BC. A provincial strategy can provide the framework for a consistent approach to support youth specific needs. It can also highlight best practices to supporting youth with disabilities in their employment. This will help employment programs better serve youth to find and keep jobs.

The BC Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction has provided CanAssist at the University of Victoria funding to develop this provincial strategy. In collaboration with a Provincial Network of Stakeholders (the Network), CanAssist is building a Provincial Employment Strategy for Youth with Disabilities (ESYD).

Approach

With support and guidance from the Provincial Network, CanAssist is collecting information from the following groups to understand the gaps, barriers, and best practices in the current support landscape:

- *Youth with disabilities*
- *Caregivers of youth with disabilities*
- *Employment service providers*
- *Teachers/educators*
- *Employers*

With understanding of this landscape, CanAssist will develop a Strategy that addresses gaps and barriers and highlights best practice.



Youth Focus Groups

In the Spring of 2022, CanAssist hosted focus groups with 14 youth participants from across BC. These youth were split into two groups of seven. One group explored the gaps and barriers faced in the employment journey and the other explored best practices. This report presents themes from both discussions.

The goal of these focus groups was to gain understanding of how youth with disabilities experience their employment journey in BC. This understanding informed the development of a larger scale survey that was issued to youth across the province.

Recruitment

To recruit focus group participants, the project team compiled a database of disability and youth serving organizations in BC. This database also included accessible learning centres in post-secondary institutions. Team members then telephoned or emailed these organizations to advertise the focus group opportunity. Organizations then spread the information through their networks. The Provincial Network also spread recruitment materials through their distribution lists. CanAssist shared materials via social media. Interested youth (from those exposed to recruitment materials) then contacted the team. These youth were sent information about the session. This information included presentation slides introducing the project and the focus group questions. Youth were also asked to share any accommodations that they needed for the session.



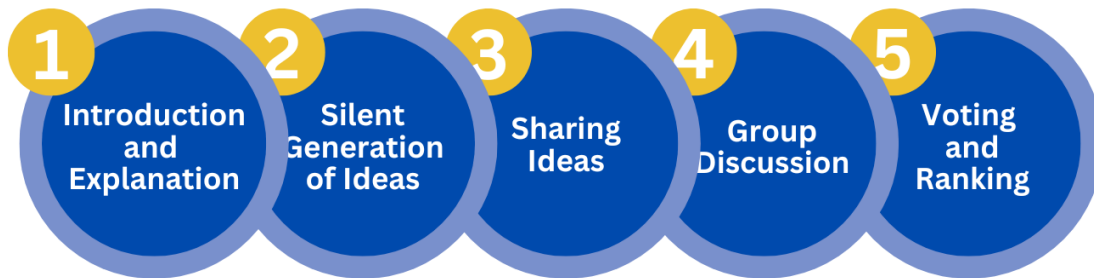
Participants

There were 14 youth who participated in these focus groups. All participants self identified as having a disability, mental health and/or substance use challenge. One worked full time, while the rest worked part time, were laid off from Covid 19, were volunteering, or were not working. Three youth identified as LGBTQIA2S+. One declared Indigenous community affiliation. One had experience with government care. The following regions were represented in the group:

- *Vancouver Island/Coast*
- *Mainland/Southwest*
- *Thompson/Okanagan*

Nominal Group Technique

The youth focus groups were facilitated online, over Zoom. The 2-hour sessions were conducted using Nominal Group Technique (NGT). There are five steps to this technique:



In step 1, each group was shown a short presentation on the topic. Groups then entered the silent idea generation phase. Here, they were shown questions and prompted to brainstorm their thoughts independently. Groups received the following questions:

- **Group 1:** *What are the top gaps and barriers that youth with disabilities face in employment? (Ordered by ranking, 1=high, 5=low.)*
- **Group 2:** *What are the best practices for supporting youth with disabilities in their employment? (Ordered by ranking, 1=high, 5=low.)*

Groups then entered the idea sharing phase. To encourage participation, participants were offered multiple ways to contribute to the discussion, including verbally (under a pseudonym for anonymity), using the chat function, or with aid of a caregiver or support person, who were welcome to attend with permission from the participant. When everyone's input was shared, participants voted to determine their highest priority answers.

Next was the discussion phase, where participants shared their thoughts and asked questions about the highest priority answers. After this, participants were asked to rank these answers on a scale from 1-5 based on how prominent they were in their personal lives (1 being Not Prominent and 5 being Very Prominent). The following pages summarize key learnings from these discussions.

Group 1: What are the top gaps and barriers that youth with disabilities face in their employment?

1. Workplace Stigma and Discrimination

Youth are concerned that potential employers and co-workers will have limited understanding of disability. They fear this will impact their employment experience in many ways, including but not limited to:

- *Not being hired for a job*
- *Not receiving appropriate accommodations on the job*
- *Being viewed as less competent in their work because of their disability and/or need for accommodations*

One participant noted that during job interviews, employers may assume candidates are able-bodied/neurotypical unless they have a visible disability. Without seeing a visible indication of disability, employers may be less likely to understand the need for accommodations. Also, when employers do not signal that they are responsive to accommodations in general, the onus is put on the youth to bring up the accommodation process and advocate for what they need. This can be very intimidating.

Another participant cited incidents of being both underworked and overworked. In the incidents where they were underworked, they did not receive shifts. When they were overworked, they felt that the employer took advantage of them. Youth also had concerns that they might be bullied by co-workers or an employer for aspects of their disability (e.g., for performing work tasks slower than other staff). One youth shared how past experiences of name calling impacted their self-worth and mental health, making it difficult for them to feel safe returning to the workforce. They shared that they avoided potential work opportunities out of fear that bullying, and stigmatization could happen again.

2. Rigid Work Schedules and Inaccessible Job Postings

Several participants shared how past employers did not understand their needs. This lack of understanding impacted their access to needed accommodations (e.g., not getting needed time off or customized responsibilities).

Youth also noted how job descriptions can be rigid and unwelcoming. For instance, when they include specific requirements like “must be able to lift 80 lbs”, some youth feel discouraged in applying, as this specific requirement is not feasible for them.

When work schedules are rigid, transportation can also pose a barrier for youth. Youth who rely on public transportation services like HandyDART are at a disadvantage. When the service is not available, they cannot reach their employment. Without employer flexibility, they are at risk of not being hired and/or losing their job.

One participant noted how shifts are often scheduled during the daytime. This puts many youths with disabilities in a position where they must choose between essential services like community support, physical therapy, etc., and employment.



3. Difficult to Balance Work and Life

Youth noted how difficult it is to balance work with everything else in life (e.g., school, friends, family, chores, etc.). They feel added anxieties around the job accommodation process. This is a stressful experience, as they feel that many employers see accommodating people as a chore. With these employer perceptions, youth feel their needs make them inferior to other employees without job accommodation needs. This impacts their motivation to pursue employment.



4. Limited Sick Days

Youth shared that they were uncomfortable asking employers for sick days and mental health days. This was especially true during the probationary period, where they feared being let go without warning. Since the participants had not experienced much flexibility from employers in the past, they assumed that time off requests would be met with frustration. This impacted their comfort level with advocating for what they need.

5. Limited Opportunity to Learn

Youth were concerned about their capacity to learn work tasks at the same rate as their co-workers. And they felt embarrassed to ask for refreshers on how to do things. They mentioned how beneficial mentorship opportunities with co-workers would be for on-the-job learning. Companionship opportunities were also suggested to help youth feel more comradery in the workplace.

Youth also discussed barriers around education requirements. They pointed out that many youths with disabilities do not have a high school diploma. Some have a modified version. These things make it extremely challenging to find work when high school education is a requirement.

Another important insight from youth was that many entry-level jobs are in the customer service industry (e.g., fast food, cashiers, retail, etc.). These jobs are not always conducive to the skills and experiences of youth with disabilities.

Group 2: What are the best practices for supporting youth with disabilities in their employment?

1. *Supportive Work Environment*

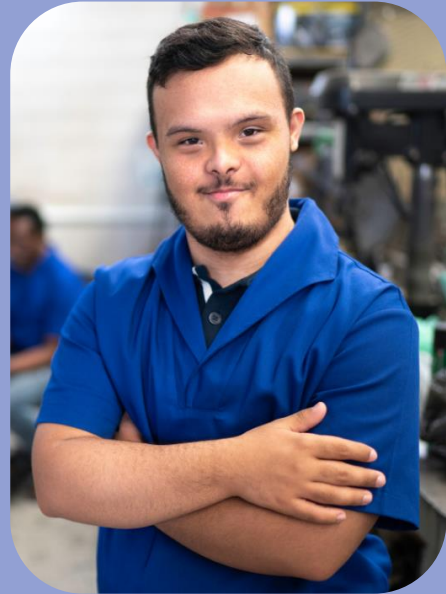
Youth shared that a supportive work environment is the top-rated best practice. This means having supportive co-workers and a supervisor that encourages open and honest discussion in the workplace. It also means that the employer supports all staff to learn about and practice accessibility.

The workplace must also be inclusive. Employers should hire inclusively, promote inclusive language and attitudes around the workplace, and ensure physical spaces are accessible.

Several participants also noted the value of having a boss who understands their disability. When they felt comfortable talking to their boss about their accommodation needs, they felt supported.

Youth touched on the fact that accessibility does not mean tokenism. They shared how important it is for employers to hire based on what a candidate can do – versus pigeonholing them based on what they cannot do.

A participant also shared how success in the workplace is often only possible if an employee's basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, housing, etc.) are being met. When youth are supported to access fundamental needs, they will achieve more success at work.



2. Mental Health Days

Youth shared how important it is for employers to understand that accommodations are sometimes needed for mental health. Having mental health days was cited as a best practice.



3. Access to Secondary Education and Skills Training

Youth discussed the value of work experience programs offered through the school system. They shared how these help youth with disabilities build soft skills and gain work experience early. However, one youth noted how these programs need to be accessible and provide individualized support to each youth.

4. Career Encouragement

Youth discussed how important it was to receive career encouragement from the people around them. They described this as encouragement from family, friends, mentors, spiritual supports, therapists, and professionals to develop skills, and explore career paths, training, and education opportunities. Job coaches, career counsellors, or other employment support professionals can support career encouragement too. Youth shared that receiving support from these professionals to work through anxieties, find work that is meaningful, and manage barriers is helpful.



5. On Going Support from Employers

Youth shared that it's best practice when employers provide on-going support at work. This requires them to recognize that the needs of youths with disabilities may change over time. One youth mentioned the importance of making adaptations as needs arise. When there is frequent opportunity for open and honest conversations about work tasks, youth feel supported and set up to succeed.

Conclusion

As noted, the learnings from this focus group informed the development of a larger scale survey. This survey was designed to delve further into the following themes:

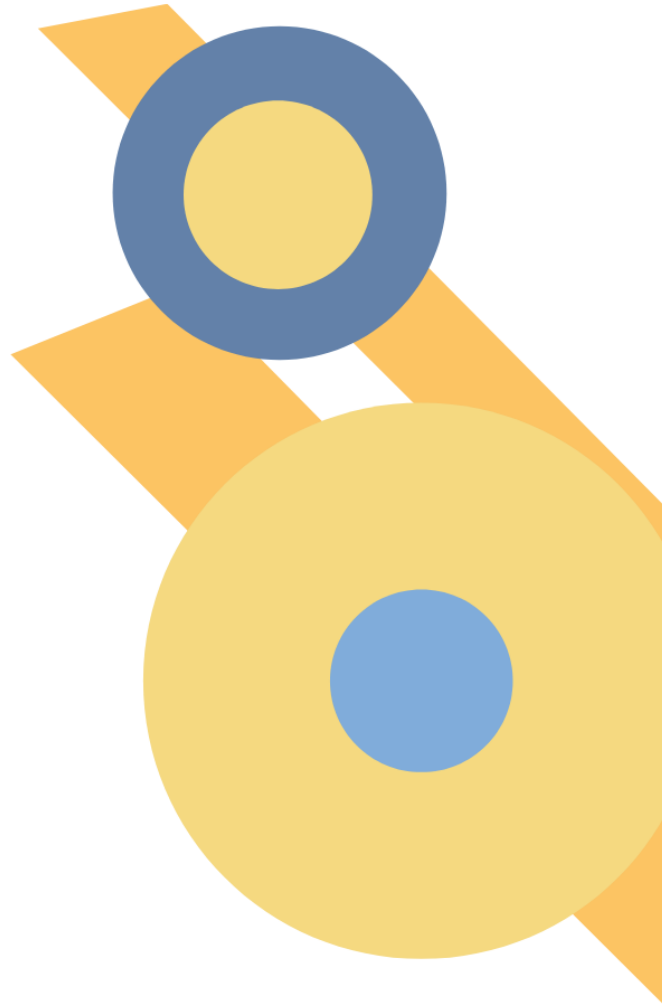
Gaps and Barriers



Best Practices



The report for the provincial survey will be released in the Spring of 2023.



Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge our Provincial Network and all the youth serving organizations in BC that helped us recruit participants for this focus group. We would also like to acknowledge and thank our 14 focus group participants for their important insights.

This project is funded by the BC Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR). Funding is provided by the Government of Canada through the Canada British Columbia Workforce Development Agreement.