
Breaking Barriers: Advancing Inclusive Employment for People with Disabilities in Canada's Green Economy

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About ECO Canada

Environmental Careers Organization of Canada (ECO Canada) stewards Canada's growing environmental workforce across all industries. For over 30 years, we have worked with some of Canada's brightest minds, and the organizations that employ them.

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- employers find and keep qualified practitioners,
- governments develop programs and update policies, and
- educators and trainers adapt their offerings to prepare the workforce that is and will be in demand.

As a not-for-profit organization, we provide up-to-date and relevant workforce data and insights for policy, business, and educational purposes. Our knowledge and expertise span nationally across all provinces and territories, as well as within major Canadian industries including agriculture, forestry, energy, mining, construction, manufacturing, professional and technical services. We not only look back at historical data of the sector, we also continuously work to find and identify trends that will impact the future of the workforce.

The complete collection of reports is available at eco.ca.

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Canadian Association for Supported Employment
L'Association Canadienne de soutien à l'emploi

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Introduction and Highlights

Disability is a unique minority group that can affect anyone at any time. Despite a significant portion of Canadians experiencing disabilities, many face barriers to employment. Employers often overlook these individuals, missing out on potential benefits like increased profitability, competitive advantage, and a more inclusive work culture.

The environmental labour force is growing, yet a large pool of untapped talent with disabilities remains underutilized. This research explores the current state of supported employment for people with disabilities in Canada's green economy. It sheds light on the opportunities and challenges faced by individuals experiencing disabilities as they seek meaningful work in the environmental sector. By highlighting key findings and trends, this report aims to support strategies that foster greater inclusivity, ensuring that the green economy remains accessible and beneficial to all.

To gather these insights, we conducted interviews with representatives from organizations that support employment for people with disabilities (Supported Employment Service Agencies), organizations in the environmental sector (Environmental Employers), and individuals with disabilities seeking environmental employment (Jobseekers).

Through these interviews, we captured a range of perspectives, including the challenges and opportunities faced by Supported Employment Service Agencies in connecting individuals with disabilities to meaningful work, the approaches Environmental Employers are adopting to foster inclusivity, and the experiences of individuals with disabilities as they navigate career paths in the environmental sector.

SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICE AGENCIES

These organizations emphasized the strengths and benefits that these individuals bring to potential employers.

They also have many services that both employers and job seekers with disabilities could benefit from.

ENVIRONMENTAL EMPLOYERS

These organizations sometimes hire individuals with disabilities but express concerns about meeting job requirements and potential challenges.

Many roles in this sector require higher education, which may limit opportunities for individuals unable to attain such qualifications.

JOBSEEKERS

Individuals with disabilities showed a strong interest in working within the environmental sector.

One recurring request was for the industry to acknowledge and leverage their abilities effectively.

These findings underscore the importance of raising awareness within the environmental sector about the capabilities of individuals with disabilities. Unconscious biases may hinder individuals with disabilities from showcasing their skills, thereby limiting the talent pool for the environmental sector. Hiring people experiencing disability can be beneficial both for the individual and the business.

Methodology

This study was designed to collect data to gain a better understanding of the landscape of supported employment in the environmental sector.

The study was a qualitative one, and the findings here may not necessarily be representative of environmental employers (and jobseekers and supported employment agencies) across all industries and geographies.

The Case for Supported Employment

Disability is unique because it is the only minority group that a person can join at any time of their life. Some people are born with a disability, while others develop them later in life. The term “disability” can mean different things to different people, so it is not always clear who has a disability and who does not. In a workplace setting, disability means “a health condition that interferes with how an employee goes about their daily activities” (Kryhul, 2022).

They can be permanent, temporary, or come and go. Statistics Canada estimates that 27% of Canadians ages 15+ have a disability (StatsCan, 2022). This is a significant amount of people who may struggle to work without extra support and accommodations.



We can do it because we are smart enough and can know what to do. We just need more time and more help, We are not people that cannot learn, we can learn we just need a bit more patience and time to adapt.

– INTERVIEWED JOB SEEKER

The environmental labour force is expected to grow by nine percent over the next 10 years (ECO Canada, 2024). At the same time, the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW) estimates that there are roughly 645,000 Canadians experiencing disabilities who could work but do not (CCRW, 2023). Unfortunately, it is estimated that only 60 percent of businesses believe recruiting and hiring people who have a disability increases the pool of qualified candidates (Gasper et al., n.d.).

As a result, while employers struggle to fill positions, many are overlooking a significant number of potential workers. People experiencing disabilities represent one of the largest sources of untapped talent in the labour force. About 2/3 of unemployed people with a disability are willing to work but cannot find employment (Gasper et al., n.d.). Thus, efforts to improve the inclusion of people with disabilities are needed (Lindsay et. Al).

Findings show that benefits of including people with disabilities include the following (Lindsay et al., 6):

- Improvements in profitability
 - Profits and cost-effectiveness, turnover and retention, reliability and punctuality, employee loyalty, company image

- Competitive advantage
 - Diverse customers, customer loyalty and satisfaction, innovation, productivity, work ethic, safety
 - Inclusive work culture and ability awareness

Hiring People with Disabilities: Common Misconceptions

Still, many Canadian companies report being unsure of how to reach this talent pool. A lack of understanding can lead to company hiring processes and systems that create barriers and push people to self-disqualify.

Businesses always seek to have a competitive advantage over their competitors. The employers we interviewed had three main concerns about hiring disabled workers.

SAFETY AND ABILITY

Concern about hiring workers who they fear might be placed in situations that are especially unsafe given the disability

WORK PERFORMANCE

Concern about the ability of people with disabilities to perform the job duties

COST OF ACCOMMODATIONS

Concern about the financial costs that would need to be incurred to provide accommodations to people with disabilities



Our conversations with organizations that support employment of people with disabilities provided insights that can help alleviate these concerns.

1. Evidence suggests that workers with disabilities have equal (if not better) safety awareness and records than those without disabilities.

People with disabilities may be more vulnerable to work injury not because of their behaviours, but they may be more vulnerable to an unsafe environment around them (Bonaccio et al., 2020). With proper training, planning, and accommodations, unnecessary threat and risk to a worker with disability can be avoided.

2. Having/experiencing a disability does not mean an inability to work.

The focus should be on whether and how a disability may affect one's ability to perform specific tasks. A different approach to the work may be required, or support dividing up the required tasks, but in many cases a complete re-imagining of the position is unnecessary. If an employee's competencies are accurately matched with the job requirements, managers can ensure that the employee's disability has no effect on his or her performance.

3. Employers don't always have a good picture of how much accommodations will cost them.

Usually costs are marginal (<\$500) or nonexistent (i.e., the flexibility to work from home) and if they are too much of a burden, many support agencies can help. For examples of types of accommodations, please refer to our guide "**Workplace Accommodations for Employees with Disabilities.**" The accommodations listed have an average cost of around \$300 – typically there may be a startup cost to acquire adaptive tools, but almost always, there is no recurring cost to the employer.

The types of accommodations that the focus group members required included:

- Simplified task lists
- Support with employment skills needed (resume, cover letter, job search, interview prep)
- Ergonomic desks, chairs, workstations set up, one-handed keyboard
- Teaching digital literacy skills
- JAWS, Braille display and reader
- Networking
- Learning disability software (e.g., Kurzweil Education)
- Scanner pens

Support Organizations

Supported employment programs help people with disabilities obtain and maintain employment. These organizations use a flexible holistic model in which each job seeker is worked with individually to match the specific needs of the individual. It starts with the belief that “everyone who wants paid employment can attain it, if the proper supports are in place” (CASE).

Stronger supported employment networks in the environmental sector could help more people with disabilities find careers and fill the talent gap. The environmental sector presents some challenges to employing people with disabilities, so a higher degree of collaboration would be beneficial.

Prospective job seekers aren't always sure of how to begin looking for a position and may need additional support and training to be able to do so. They may be unsure about asking for accommodations and how to find jobs that fit their talents and abilities, while still being able to meet all their needs.

Likewise, employers may not know about the talents and skills disabled workers can bring, or how to best support them in positions at their organizations. Employers may be reluctant to hire for positions that need to be altered to meet accommodation needs and may worry about taking on undue hardship.

Support organizations can help bridge this gap for both parties since they help employers and people experiencing disability to mutually benefit from workplace inclusion. They do this through many different methods (see [Appendix B](#) for more detail about the interviewed organizations).

These support organizations help people with disabilities find and keep jobs and sometimes can match them with employers and assist with wages during a probationary period. To help job seekers be workforce-ready, these organizations often offer required training, tailored to the individual. They may coach with any skills that job seekers might need extra help on, job preparedness training, and assistance in job applications.

Support organizations also provide employers with practical tools and personalized help to improve their confidence in hiring workers with disabilities. They offer employer-specific training, toolkits, and resources. They can also receive support and knowledge to help them hire, accommodate, and retain persons with disabilities in their organizations.

One of the biggest challenges these organizations face is connecting their services with the people and employers who need them.

SPOTLIGHT: THE SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT MODEL [\(FROM CASE\)](#)

The supported employment model is incredibly flexible, and each step is tailored specifically to the individual. Six fundamental steps are at the heart of this model:

I. JOB SEEKER ENGAGEMENT

Many potential job seekers receive social and/or family support. They may wish to find employment as a way of improving their quality of life, but they aren't sure where to begin or if they should. Service providers can encourage potential job seekers to take the next step.

II. SKILLS ASSESSMENT VOCATIONAL PROFILING

Service providers work with the job seeker, as well as family members and other care providers, to identify career goals, interests, preferences, skills and supports needed. The goal is to pinpoint the ideal type of employment for the job seeker.

III. EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

Just like the job seeker in Step 1, the employer may not know where to start. How do they remove recruitment or employment barriers? How do they find the right worker? What changes need to be made to the physical workplace and workplace culture? Service providers can provide resources and expertise to ensure a successful placement.

IV. JOB ANALYSIS

Job analysis is about more than matching a person with an opening. All aspects of the job and the workplace must be considered to ensure the correct candidate is chosen. Modifications or assistance requirements are identified and arranged.

V. WORKPLACE SUPPORT

Appropriate levels of support must be offered to ensure a smooth transition into the workforce. Individual development plans are designed. Employers and colleagues are, where appropriate, involved in training and support. The service provider may also provide support outside of work.

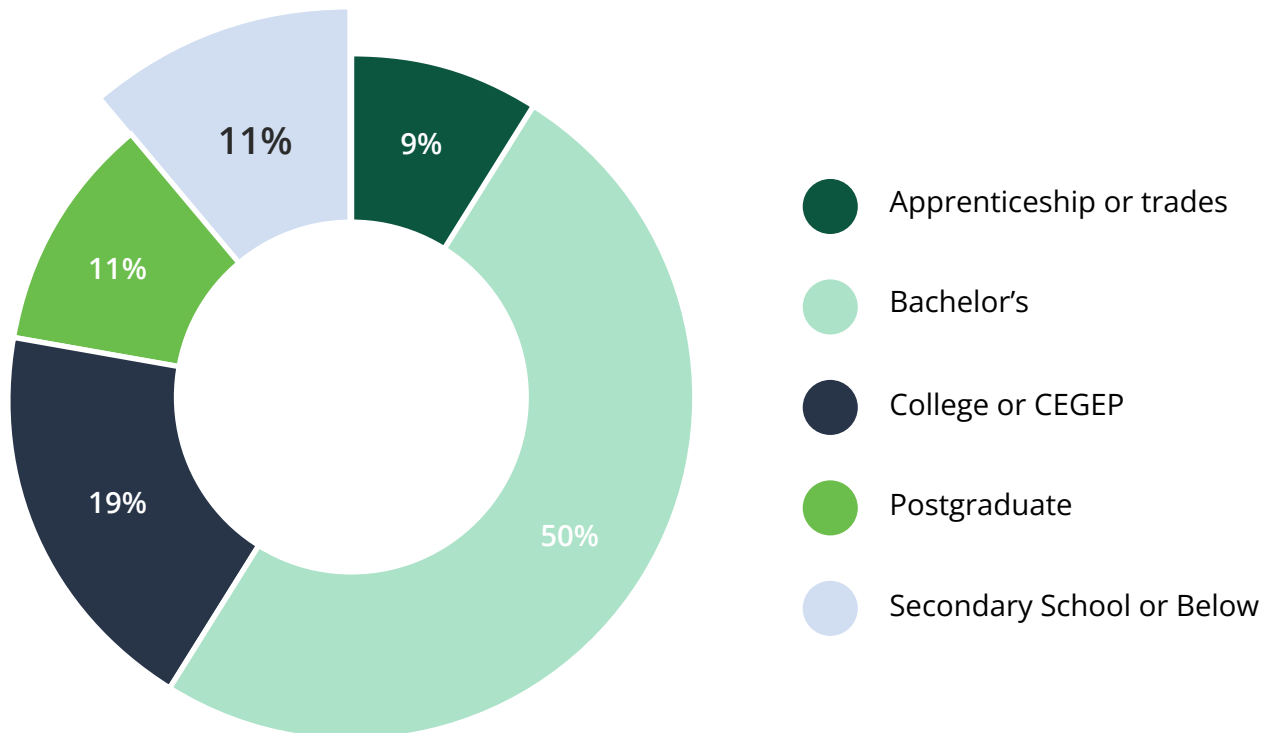
VI. CAREER DEVELOPMENT

People who experience disability, like other employees, generally do not aspire to stay in the same job their whole lives. Supported employment should include ongoing training, increasing responsibilities, and other opportunities.

Accommodations in the Environmental Sector

There are some challenges to matching people with disabilities with appropriate positions. Since talent, interest, and ability are so specific to the individual, it can be difficult to address with broad-brush solutions. The vast majority of positions in the environmental sector have post-secondary education requirements (see figure below). In our National Demographic Survey of the Environmental Workforce, **only 11% of the respondents have secondary school or below.**

FIGURE 1. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL WORKFORCE



The interviews we conducted as part of this study align with these findings (please refer to [Appendix A](#) for more detail). It was found that most job opportunities in the environmental sector for individuals with disabilities with a high school education are in fields requiring physical labour or administrative roles within offices.

Employers emphasized the importance of physical ability, fine and gross motor skills, and strength for the positions in the environmental sector without higher education requirements. A driver's license is also often a requirement. Unfortunately, accommodations for mobility, motor skills, and physical strength limitations are not typically feasible for field positions, leading to potential exclusion from certain roles. However, individuals with conditions such as mental disorders, sensory disorders, autism spectrum disorders, cognitive/developmental disabilities, and others that do not impact physical abilities may still be considered for labour positions.

It was noted by all organizations that while they would strive to accommodate individuals, most field or labour positions may not be conducive to on-site job coaching. However, they indicated that they could offer mentoring support internally during training and highlighted that a driver's license would be necessary for most positions.

Our findings that most occupations require a high level of verbal and written communication were confirmed in our interviews. This would preclude someone with a learning difficulty, a cognitive/developmental involvement, and/or some sensory disorders, such as low vision, blindness, deafness, and speech disorders, from being able to do the work. All employers spoken to were open to accommodations including software/hardware, high tech and low tech to support clients with the above limitations in their workforce. Most simply did not know what was available and after speaking with us stated they were open to more equity hiring.



Barriers to Employment in the Environmental Sector

One of the issues we found when interviewing these companies was the level of education criteria typically required for workers in environmental positions. Several positions within the environmental field may have cognitive requirements that could present challenges for individuals with cognitive or developmental disabilities.

For candidates with higher levels of education, most disabilities can be accommodated for most positions (mobility disabilities in field positions are one exception to this, for example). For those without post-secondary education, education requirements are difficult to get around.

While there is no immediate solution for this issue, micro-credentials may help individuals with disabilities be recognized for the skills and talents they possess.

Dismantling myths and misconceptions about employing people with disabilities can make hiring them a more appealing option. Addressing inaccurate perceptions about the costs and challenges of accommodations, as well as the abilities of workers with disabilities, can help shift attitudes. Employers have suggested that more education on the actual costs of accommodations and how to obtain them would be very helpful. Although there are a limited number of positions currently available to high school-educated people with disabilities in the environmental sector, there is the potential for that to change.

With the assistance of support organizations, accommodations could be made in other positions across the environmental sector. Certain jobs could be adjusted to create more positions and opportunities for prospective workers experiencing disability. Employers may benefit from assistance from support organizations to ensure that this process is effective and beneficial to both the employer and job seekers with disabilities.

Conclusion

There is a significant potential for including people with disabilities in the environmental sector, regardless of their level of education. While there are challenges, particularly in terms of meeting educational and physical requirements, these can be mitigated through targeted accommodations and support from specialized organizations. Dismantling misconceptions about the cost and feasibility of hiring individuals with disabilities is crucial.

With proper education and resources, employers can better understand the value that these individuals bring, ultimately enriching the workforce and fostering a more inclusive industry. Collaboration between environmental organizations and support agencies is essential to creating a more equitable job market that benefits all stakeholders.



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Appendix A – Summary of Interviews with Environmental Employers

As part of our research into the opportunities for persons with disabilities in the environmental sector, we interviewed four employers. We asked the following questions:

1. Do you have an equity hiring policy that includes people with disabilities? Can you provide any details on what the policy includes – for, e.g., do you ever designate postings that indicate preference given? Or do job postings indicate an option to self-declare as from an equity group such as disability?
2. Do you know if you have staff who have self-disclosed that they have a disability or need accommodation? What is the approximate percentage or number of employees?
3. What sorts of accommodations have been provided for employees with disabilities?
4. Do you have a formal process for providing accommodations? What is this process?
5. What jobs are available in your company for employees with only a high school education?
6. Can you give me some of the skills/abilities those positions require? Physical acuity, cognitive acuity, equipment or machinery used, device allowance policy (e.g., we had a client who was an employee at a mine – needed to use assisted technology for report writing – policy would not allow the use of his phone – recommended scanner pen as does not need internet access).
7. Given the requirements of these positions, do you see a possibility with appropriate accommodations in place such as:
 - a. flexible or modified schedules or breaks
 - b. multiple methods of communication e.g. – visual task lists, verbal and written instructions, apple watch/phone setting breaks
 - c. job carving as in removing or sharing job tasks
 - d. increase in feedback and training, extended learning curve
 - e. scanner pen for reporting
 - f. onsite job coach.
 - g. Specialized software
 - h. Assistive devices for lifting, carrying, etc.
8. Are there mentorship or support programs in place specifically for employees with disabilities?
9. Is there anything you would like to add?

The organizations we interviewed provided the following insights:

1. Job opportunities for high-school graduates with a disability are limited in the environmental sector. Although some companies can accommodate persons with disabilities in field technician jobs or labourer positions, opportunities are most likely to be found in junior-level administrative positions. In some cases, union agreements may prevent some accommodations from being provided and require job candidates to have more than a high school diploma.
2. Employers can more easily provide accommodations for workers with some post-secondary education. The main exception would be accommodations for mobility disabilities in field positions.
3. Employers could benefit from more information about job carving and the costs of different accommodations and how to acquire them. Financial support for smaller organizations wanting to provide accommodations would also be helpful. These organizations also indicated that learning about available tools for workers with disabilities and how they could be incorporated into the work environment would make it easier to consider hiring a worker with a disability.

Appendix B – Summary of Interviews with Support Organizations

As part of our research into the opportunities for persons with disabilities in the environmental sector, we interviewed three organizations that provide supported employment services.

MENTORABILITY

Interview with Glen Walsh

MentorAbility is a member aid type agency that writes papers and academic papers and provides guidance in terms of accommodation or supportive employment in Canada.

Glen states that they have innovation lab as well, which looks at different employment models and helping people with disabilities get into various sectors or trying out different employment models to help people with who experience disabilities to find employment.

They do have training for people trying to help people with disabilities, job development training, and training for employers and what information they may need. They are also working coming up with disclosure course as well in terms of what to do around disclosure for employers. The training that they offer is more for service providers or employers who want to help accommodate people with disabilities.

When asked if there were any barriers to getting people with disabilities placed in the workplace, Glen stated that “The thing is employers have lots of questions that kind of they want answers to. It's kind of the lack of knowledge around helping people, assisting people with disabilities and it's just informing them on the various topics that they need. They typically need help on how to accommodate people with disabilities.

Glen says that moving forward, “we're interested in is in terms of helping the job seekers in terms of having disability, linking them with employers in the environmental sector and doing mentor and doing mentor ability programmes.”

NEIL SQUIRE

Interview with Nikki Langdon

Nikki spoke to her organization's capacity to help job seekers with disabilities. Most of their training programs are geared toward an individual and are personalized. They don't directly get people a job, but they can connect with their employer partners and help them get an interview. Basically, “teaching them to fish” so to speak.

Nikki says that stigma from employers and the industries are the biggest barriers. Sometimes, employers need help to see what someone with a disability can do. She tries to work with employers and organizations one on one to dismantle the stigma, as well as going out and involving the community as much as possible. Helping employers realize the potential that they are missing out on is incredibly important.

SELECTIONS

Interview with Pablo Castro and Bailey Dezutter

Bailey and Pablo spoke to their experiences reaching out to employers for the first time. Bailey largely works with people in the Trades and has gotten a lot of responses from employers with concern that individuals with disabilities are not going to be safe on their construction site. Usually, they try to reassure people by talking about all the different training and certifications that Selections offers to help job seekers with disabilities be successful on the construction site (or whatever job they are applying for).

Selections connects people with disabilities with whatever training they require. They connect with accessible versions of classes including things like women's first aid, fall protection, confined spaces, elevated platforms, drivers training, etc. They are able to schedule sessions that are geared towards some individuals who may not be as independent.

Selections directly provides the individual with support on putting together a resume, interviewing, and then helps with supports once the individual first gets to the job site.

They said that there has been some success with hiring more than one individual from a particular demographic group so that they've got a bit of a support network in the worksite.

Selections tries to focus on highlighting the skills and talents of the prospective workers over their disability. They help the employer manage and figure out job carving, in order to fit new employees in and meet their needs.

When asked what they would say to help an employer see the value of hiring people with disabilities, Bailey answered: "I've spoken to a lot of um trades people and one of the things I hear most often is they just want an employee who's going to show up 100% of the time and I think that I fall back on that a lot and I tell that to other employers and I tell them that you have someone standing in front of you that has been coming to our program for three months and who wants this job more than anyone."

They emphasized that one size does not fit all, and every individual you get is going to be different.

Appendix C – Summary of Interviews with Job Seekers Experiencing Disability

As part of our research into the opportunities for persons with disabilities in the environmental sector, we conducted a focus group that included ten people with disabilities. The types of disabilities represented in the focus group included physical/mobility, sensory, psychological/mental, learning, and developmental/cognitive disabilities. **We asked the focus group participants the following questions:**

1. What challenges do you face when looking for employment?
2. How does your disability affect your employment search?
3. Are there jobs/tasks you can't do because of your disability? For example, Physical jobs? Digital jobs? Manual labour? Driving? Full-time work? Extra hours/overtime? Crowds? Fast-paced environments? Working with machinery?
4. What accommodations or support do you need to work at any job? What has Neil Squire provided to you so far? Is it helping?
5. Is the environment important to you?
6. Have you ever considered working in the environmental industry? Is it something you are passionate about?
7. Out of all the jobs I told you about in the environmental industry, what would interest you most?
8. Do you know anyone who works in the environmental industry? What do they do? Could you do that job? Would you like to do that job or a job like it?
9. What kind of supports or accommodations would you need to work in the environmental industry?
10. Do you have any questions? Suggestions?

The focus group participants revealed several challenges that they face when looking for employment in any sector:

- Finding employment that will accommodate their needs
- No driver's license (note that only two in the group hold a driver's license)
- Physical requirements of employment that they are not able to do (lifting, moving, walking, carrying, fine motor needs)
- Perceptions of employers
- Cost of accommodations
- Need job carving for time off and some tasks of some jobs/time off for medical/unable to do full time work
- Longer training period needed/jobs too fast-paced
- Unable to do digital work/computerized work like administration
- Can't work in crowds or with many people around
- Can't work with machinery

All focus group participants indicated an interest in working in an environmental role. Areas of interest included carbon emissions, wildlife, forestry, conservation, hatcheries, logging, horticulture, livestock, cleaning jobs, packaging, administration supporting the field, recycling, working outdoors, waste reduction, parks and recreation, and gardening.

They also identified the following additional supports/accommodations required to work in an environmental role:

- Protective wear
- Extra training
- An understanding from the industry that people with disabilities are capable
- Help with transportation to get to remote jobs

Final thoughts from the focus group members:

- "We are able people"
- "That we are able people, and we are not defined by our restrictions, and we are more than capable of doing some things. If they even gave us a position to learn and a little more training. A job coach or something like that in their field to give you the time and show you what needs to be done, and directly learn, some extended learning time."
- "Show me where things are and what to do, give me a month or so to get used to things and learn. I can learn what to do but also you (the employer) can also learn what I need and see if it works. If it works, then bring me on, if it doesn't, then we both learnt a lot. Have some time to figure out what could work differently or maybe change."
- "Increased communication between employers and employees, so employers can fully understand what you need."
- "That they know I can do some physical but not too much. To know that I am capable and physical, but to know where the limit is. So maybe carve the job and take some of the physical requirements out."
- "I think giving people extra time and time with training. Getting to know people, their situation, and taking some time to invest in people. Don't just look at the bottom-line."
- "I was going to say just give us a chance, especially with invisible disabilities. Give us the accommodations we need."
- "We can do it because we are smart enough and can know what to do. We just need more time and more help. We are not people that cannot learn, we can learn we just need a bit more patience and time to adapt."
- "I would like a job coach to help with the job. Or even shadowing."
- "Basically, to create more opportunities to see where we can fit in, there's lots of jobs for people that are paralyzed, they just have to be accessible. They are not incapable and still have much to offer. Essentially, see what I have to offer."
- "All we need is a chance to prove that we can do things, instead of having certain restrictions."



Learn more about the project:

[Accessibility and Inclusion in the Environmental Sector](#)

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#400 – 105 12 AVENUE SE,

CALGARY, AB T2G 1A1

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