



Employers' Guide to Understanding Disability

Persons with disabilities represent a significant portion of our population, including students in our post-secondary institutions entering our current and future workforce.

According to research conducted by the David C. Onley Initiative in 2019, more than 50% of students registered with disability service offices across Ottawa's four post-secondary schools had a primary diagnosis of either a learning disability or a mental illness.

The term "disability" is a complex and continually evolving concept that covers a range of different conditions, and there is no single, all-encompassing definition. "Disability" is not a static or linear concept, rather it can be:

- visible or non-visible;
- mild, moderate, or severe;
- permanent, long-term, short-term, or episodic; and
- present from birth, caused by an accident, or developed over time.

A **Visible Disability** describes the nature or degree of disability that is visible to others (e.g., mobility-related impairments).

A **Non-Visible Disability** describes the nature or degree of disability that is invisible to others (e.g., chronic fatigue syndrome, a mental health condition or a learning disability). Conditions could simply be non-visible or might remain hidden because they are episodic (e.g., epilepsy, environmental sensitivities). Other disabilities may only become apparent through interacting with an individual and could take multiple interactions to notice (e.g., hearing loss or learning disabilities). Still others may never be apparent (e.g., mental health diagnoses).





Common types of disabilities and their associated impacts on the job include:

| Disability Type | Functional Impact | Examples of Diagnoses |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Physical and Mobility | Can affect a person's motor skills and may require the use of a mobility aid. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cerebral palsy • epilepsy • narcolepsy |
| Sensory | Can affect a person's senses: vision, hearing, smell, touch or taste. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deafness • blindness • chemical sensitivities |
| Intellectual and Developmental | Can affect a person's ability to learn and use information, creating limitations in reasoning, learning and problem solving, as well as social and practical skill building, known as adaptive behaviours. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • autism spectrum disorder • Down syndrome • fetal alcohol spectrum disorder |
| Learning | Can affect the way a person takes in, stores, or uses information as well as a person's oral and written language skills, reading skills, mathematics skills, organization, and social skills. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dyslexia • dysgraphia • auditory processing disorder |
| Mental Health | Can affect a person's mental alertness, concentration, organization, and anxiety levels. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anxiety disorders • depression • post-traumatic stress disorder • obsessive-compulsive disorder • bipolar disorder • schizophrenia |



References

Canadian Association of Broadcasters. "[Recommended Guidelines on Language and Terminology – Persons with Disabilities.](#)" Accessed June 7, 2023, disability-hub.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Recommended-Guidelines-on-Language-and-Terminology-Persons-with-Disabilities_A-Manual-for-News-Professionals.pdf

Discover Ability Network. "[Discover Ability Roadmap.](#)" Accessed June 7, 2023, discoverability.network/business/roadmap

Discover Ability Network. "[The Benefits Of Hiring.](#)" Accessed June 7, 2023, discoverability.network/business/business-resources/the-benefits-of-hiring/

Employment and Social Development Canada, Accessibility resource centre. "[A Way with Words and Images: Suggestions for the portrayal of people with disabilities.](#)" Modified December 16, 2022, canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/disability/arc/words-images.html

Hire for Talent. "[The Benefits of Hiring People with Disabilities.](#)" Accessed June 7, 2023, hirefortalent.ca/toolkit/business-case

Humber College. "[Inclusive Language Guide.](#)" March 2022, humber.ca/brand/inclusive-language-guide

Mental Health Commission of Canada. "[Language Matters.](#)" August 13, 2020, mentalhealthcommission.ca/resource/language-matters/

Ontario Human Rights Commission. "[What is disability?](#)" Accessed June 7, 2023, ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability/2-what-disability

This document has been prepared through The David C. Onley Initiative for Employment and Enterprise Development (DCOI), led by the Accessibility Institute at Carleton University, and funded by the Government of Ontario. DCOI is a partnership of Algonquin College, Carleton University, La Cité and the University of Ottawa. This document footer includes the #AbleTo identifier, demonstrating the DCOI's commitment to helping every student and graduate find meaningful work. For more information, visit AbleTo.ca.