Labour market integration of persons with disabilities

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The current system for the administration of the employability development and employment assistance programs in Quebec does not promote the integration of the disabled into the conventional job market.

Four employability development and employment assistance programs\(^1\) were instituted by Quebec’s ministère de la solidarité sociale [Department of Social Solidarity], which is responsible for income security. A detailed study was conducted on participation by the disabled in these programs, each of which is intended to encourage and help income security benefit recipients\(^2\) to further their occupational training or acquire experience through a work placement. Although the disabled account for 22 percent (nearly 180,000) of all income security benefit recipients in the province, only 6 percent participate in these programs. In an effort to explain this disproportion, we attempted to identify the factors that motivate the disabled to participate in these programs and the barriers they encounter.

First of all, we analyzed all the documentation dealing with this issue which was made available to us by the Quebec Department of Social Solidarity. This documentation included the provincial Act respecting income security and its regulations, the employability development and employment assistance programs manual, and various statistical reports concerning participation in the programs.

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We then carried out a field survey. Group interviews were conducted with representatives of the staff of three Centres Travail-Québec (CTQ) and in-depth individual interviews with seven persons with disabilities who were participating in the programs and seven others who were not.

To ensure that a certain number of variables that might influence participation by the disabled were taken into consideration, two urban CTQs (with approximately 5,000 clients) and one semi-urban CTQ (with approximately 2,400 clients) were selected. The persons with disabilities who were interviewed were selected based on the various types of disability (physical, visual, hearing, mental, neurological and mental health problems) from a pool identified by the specialized job placement services for the disabled and by associations representing the disabled.

An analysis of the content of the documents revealed, on the one hand, that under the Act respecting income security, income security benefit recipients enrolled in Quebec’s financial support program must apply to participate in the employability development programs. If application is made, the Act states that an action plan must be drawn up to assist the benefit recipient to enter the labour market. Although we did not find a definition of the action plan in the documents consulted, it is our understanding that it involves identifying a certain number of methods, such as training and work placements, that will enable the benefit recipient to enter the labour market.

On the other hand, when we analyzed the definitions of the four programs provided in the employability development and employment assistance programs manual, we noted that there was considerable overlap among them. At first glance, all four of these programs aim to encourage participants to acquire the knowledge and skills they need for their integration into the labour market.

Finally, the monthly statistical reports prepared by the Department of Social Solidarity reveal that certain variables, such as household category, age group, gender and citizenship (Canadian or refugee), are considered. However, no data are gathered on the disabled as a group, let alone by type of disability.

Labour market integration depends to a great extent on the individual’s own determination.

Since the only way to participate in a program is to apply, this factor obviously influences the participation rate. A person with a disability who participates has made a conscious decision to do so. However, the disabled do not make any distinctions among the various programs. For instance, they often do not know that there are several avenues through which they can participate. As well, it is up to them to find an employer who is willing to hire them, which makes it even more difficult for them to participate.

The disabled participate mainly in one program (14 out of 18 cases), the one that is the most advantageous for the employer. In addition, they almost always work in an association representing the disabled (16 out of 18 cases). Hence, this cannot really be described as integration into the conventional labour market.

We will now endeavour to identify the factors that motivate the disabled to participate in the measures as well as the barriers they encounter.

A number of factors, mainly psychological, are incentives for the disabled to enter the labour market.

Table 1 shows the nine factors identified by respondents as incentives for the disabled to participate in the employability development programs. It also indicates how frequently these factors were mentioned by each group of respondents (CTQ staff, participating persons with disabilities and non-participating persons with disabilities).

The factor mentioned by the largest number of respondents was reduction of isolation, while increased self-esteem was the motivating factor on which there was the greatest agreement among the three groups of respondents. Finally, the three factors on which there was the least agreement were development of a social network, social recognition and reduction of family pressures.
Based on the information obtained from the various categories of respondents, these factors can be briefly defined as follows:

- **Reduction of isolation**
  
  The disabled feel isolated both physically and socially when they remain at home. They often live alone and do not have the chance to develop a circle of friends. Participation in an employability development program gives the disabled an opportunity to get out of the house, meet other people and reduce their isolation.

- **Increased self-esteem**
  
  By participating in a program, the disabled have the chance to use their abilities and develop self-confidence.

- **Chance to be more active**
  
  As a number of respondents pointed out, the disabled “do not like to sit around with nothing to do.” Inactivity is tedious. They like to get out more often and become involved in a variety of activities. They would like to be more active in their community, an opportunity which participation in a program provides.

- **Opportunity for further training**
  
  By participating in the programs, the disabled can take courses. The opportunity to develop their knowledge is highly motivating.

- **Improvement of technical skills**
  
  Being in the workplace gives the disabled an opportunity to perform new tasks and develop skills while receiving supervision that facilitates this learning.

- **Opportunity to verify ability to work**
  
  In many cases, persons with disabilities have never had the opportunity to hold a real job. As a result, they do not really know whether they are able to work. Participation in a program is a good way for them to verify their ability to work.

- **Development of social network**
  
  Participation in a program enables the disabled to learn to communicate with an employer, to work as a member of a team and even to develop a circle of friends in the workplace.
Social recognition
The disabled have an opportunity to feel useful in their community and to be recognized socially as workers.

Reduction of family pressures
More often than not, adults with disabilities are cared for by the members of their families. The constant presence of the disabled at home often eventually becomes stressful for these family members. Integrating the disabled into the labour market appears to be a solution that gives the family some respite from their responsibilities as caregivers.

Table 2 shows the nine main obstacles identified by respondents as hindering participation by the disabled in the employability development programs. It also indicates how frequently these factors were mentioned by each group of respondents.

There was much greater consensus concerning obstacles than motivating factors. In fact, all the respondents recognized that there is a lack of encouragement to participate, that the relationship between the disabled and the CTQ officers is not personalized enough, that the disabled do not meet with their officers enough and that they must find a job themselves if they want to participate in a program. The disabled and their officers do not agree, however, on the purpose of their meetings. We also note that the lack of coordination among the CTQ officers, the representatives of specialized placement services and the representatives of associations representing the disabled is recognized as an obstacle mainly by the CTQ staff and the persons with disabilities participating in the programs.

Based on the information provided by the respondents, these obstacles can be summarized as follows:

Lack of encouragement to participate
The Act respecting income security specifies that benefit recipients enrolled in the province’s financial support program can participate in the programs if they apply. The CTQ officers do not encourage the disabled to participate in the programs and are even less inclined to draw up an action plan for them.

Lack of a personalized relationship between the disabled and the officers of the Centres Travail-Québec
The lack of a personalized relationship makes it impossible to establish the climate of trust and cooperation that is essential for the disabled to request the officers’ assistance or even to accept the recommendations they make to facilitate participation by the disabled in a program.

Few meetings between the disabled and their Centre Travail-Québec officers
The CTQ officers usually have only one meeting a year with the persons with disabilities under their responsibility. The officers therefore know very little about these individuals, their abilities, their limitations and their potential for participation in a program.

Different perceptions of the purpose of the relationship between the disabled and their Centre Travail-Québec officers
On the one hand, the CTQ officers state that they must communicate with the disabled in order to reduce their insecurity by providing them with more information. On the other hand, the disabled say that they contact their officer only to secure the approvals required by the financial support program. It appears that the disabled are on the defensive during their contacts with their officer.

The requirement that the disabled find a job themselves in order to be able to participate in a program
If they wish to participate in a program, the disabled must find a job themselves, and in most cases they find a position with an association representing the disabled. The motivation to participate in a program therefore comes entirely from the individual.

Lack of awareness on the part of conventional employers
In almost all instances, persons with disabilities find work with an association representing the disabled.
The lack of communication and cooperation with employers other than these associations is a barrier to participation and especially hinders the integration of the disabled into a conventional workplace.

- **Confusion concerning the types of programs available**
  There are several different programs with the same objective, namely employability development. The definitions of these programs are far from mutually exclusive, and this is undoubtedly why the disabled do not perceive any difference between them.

- **Lack of coordination between the Centres Travail-Québec and the specialized job placement services for the disabled**
  Because the officers at the specialized placement services do not work closely with the CTQ officers, a person with a disability who makes an effort to participate in a program is deprived of follow-up. This often results in lack of participation. If the individual does participate, the process is much longer and more complicated.

- **Inadequate relations between the Centres Travail-Québec and associations representing the disabled**
  The respondents with disabilities pointed out that the associations that represent the disabled are not very active in the administration of the programs. The disabled therefore do not receive support from these associations, and their participation is reduced.

The preliminary findings are helpful in understanding the process of labour market integration of the disabled, but a great deal of research remains to be done.
The imbalance observed between the proportion of persons with disabilities who receive income security benefits and the proportion who participate in the employability development programs is largely, if not entirely, explained by our research findings. To participate in the programs, a person with a disability must demonstrate a great deal of determination and be very resourceful. The disabled themselves must obtain information on the programs. In a situation characterized by the lack of cooperation among the various parties involved (CTQ, specialized placement services for the disabled, associations representing the disabled and conventional employers), the disabled have to make their own contacts and find an employer who will agree to hire them. Lastly, the disabled have to submit an application to participate to an officer whose main function is to monitor and verify their eligibility for income security benefits.

These obstacles to participation are mainly external and have nothing to do with the disabled themselves. The provisions of the Act, the lack of cooperation and coordination among the parties involved (CTQ, specialized placement services for the disabled and associations representing the disabled), the lack of information on the programs and the lack of job offers are all factors that support such a conclusion.

These barriers undoubtedly also explain why it is almost always the associations representing the disabled that act as employers. As a result, the persons with disabilities who take part in the programs find themselves working with other persons with disabilities and do not really have an opportunity to become part of a group of workers who are not disabled. This prompts us to conclude that the current system for the administration of the employability development and employment assistance programs does not promote the integration of the disabled into the conventional job market. The question arises, then, whether these programs, whose primary purpose is to facilitate the permanent integration of income security benefit recipients into the labour market, are effective for the disabled.

Endnotes

1. Expérience de travail en milieu communautaire (EXTRA) [community work experience], Stage en milieu de travail (SMT) [work placement], Programme d’aide à l’intégration à l’emploi (PAIE) [labour market integration assistance program] and Reconnaissance des activités de développement de l’employabilité (RADE) [recognition of employability development activities].

2. The Government of Quebec ensures that every citizen has a minimum income and provides benefits to those who do not. The level of this income varies depending on a number of factors (marital status, number of children, employability, etc.).

3. Administrative centres with the staff responsible for administering the provisions of the Act respecting income security and for assisting benefit recipients in returning to or entering the labour market.

4. The specialized job placement services for the disabled are organizations outside the CTQs. They operate on a non-profit basis and their objective is to help persons with disabilities find jobs.
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Bibliography


“Frankly, Bob, some of the other employees feel you have a slightly superior attitude!”