Rural Realities: Bridging the Diversity Disconnect & Supporting Inclusion in Challenging Contexts

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Abstract

Workplaces everywhere, but especially in rural and remote communities, are not always welcoming to all who live within those communities. Many individuals are systemically marginalized, resulting in groups of people who are underrepresented in local employment. This article reports the findings of mixed-methods research conducted in BC, identifying 20 factors impacting the employment of underrepresented community members, with a particular focus on Indigenous Peoples and individuals living with disabling conditions. Based on insights and experiences from job seekers, employees, employers, and community service providers, recommendations are offered to support CDPs, employers, and policy makers to facilitate more equitable access to work for all.

Keywords: underrepresented, employment, inclusion, diversity, rural communities, Indigenous Peoples, Individuals with disabling conditions

Career development professionals (CDPs) working within rural and remote communities have identified challenges with helping their clients to find and maintain employment, even when local employers report that they are unable to find the employees that they need. To examine this disconnect, in partnership with a rural community service provider in southwestern British Columbia, Canada and, with the support of funding from the Government of Canada, we took a mixed-method approach, gathering qualitative and quantitative data from job seekers and employees who were from groups underrepresented in local workplaces, employers, and community service providers.

Literature Review

As a foundation to our research, we present some background information on rural and remote communities, the diversity of individuals living and working within those communities, who is underrepresented in local workplaces (i.e., unemployed or underemployed, but willing and able to work), and the challenges associated with providing employment services in those contexts.

Rural Communities

Although most Canadians live in urban centres close to the US border, 6.6 million live in rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2022). What constitutes "rural" seems to be inconsistent across the literature with many considering degrees of remoteness. The *Strengthening Rural Canada* initiative defined rural as communities with populations between 1,000 and 12,000 (Strengthening Rural Canada, n.d.). To put that into perspective, in 2025 the three most populous cities in Canada are expected to hit 2.6 million (Toronto), 1.6 million (Montreal), and 1.0 million (Calgary; World Population Review, 2025).

Housing affordability is among one of common benefits of rural living (Statistics Canada, 2025d); however, it's not without its drawbacks. Rural Canadians have expressed a desire for investments into internet connectivity, vibrant communities, and infrastructure (Government of Canada, 2024b). In BC, the population of rural and small towns grew 2.8% between 2021 and 2024 (Statistics Canada, 2025e), and with programs such as the *Rural Community Immigration Pilot* drawing skilled immigrants into rural communities (Government of Canada, 2025c), the population growth may look different than before with more diverse individuals.

Diverse Individuals

In today's socioeconomic and geopolitical landscape, the word "diversity" can evoke a wide range of reactions – some brimming with positivity, possibilities, and potential; others with violence, vitriol, and venom. Although the backlash on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has been felt, Canada's commitment persists within the public service (Government of Canada, 2025a) and through a long list of legislations (e.g., Accessible Canada Act, 2019), associations (e.g., CASE, n.d.), and intergovernmental organizations (e.g., United Nations, 2006, 2007) continuing to press for diversity as a positive force within work, life, and learning domains. In some instances, the DEI perspective has been expanded to include both justice (Kohl, 2022) and accessibility (Mullin et al., 2021). Information on the employment and economic participation of diverse groups is also more visible than ever. One example is the *Gender, Diversity and Inclusion Statistics Hub* (Statistics Canada, 2025c) which provides targeted information for 2SLGBTQ+, immigrants, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, racialized groups, and women.

From a researcher's perspective, narrow conceptions of diversity are helpful when crafting operational definitions and setting experimental conditions; however, this does not reflect the reality of complex people, experiences, and environments. Diversity is not only a multi-faceted construct extending across a variety of systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2003 as cited in Naidtich 2024), but also intersectional in nature (Puszka et al., 2022; Rummens, 2003) creating dynamic, unique lived realities. In our study, although we recognize complexity of culture and context, we have focused on two groups – Indigenous Peoples and individuals with disabling conditions. We recognize these categories are neither monoliths, nor static or singular.

According to the 2021 census in Canada, Indigenous People are the fastest growing population and the youngest population (Statistics Canada, 2023a). With nearly two-thirds currently of working age, the total Indigenous population comprises 5% of the Canadian population – i.e., 1.8 million (Statistics Canada, 2023a). The term "Indigenous," however, refers to people from three distinct groups – First Nations, Inuit, and Métis – and many unique communities within these groups, each with unique histories, cultural practices/protocols, spiritual beliefs, languages, and experiences with colonial violence and reconciliation efforts.

Canada also recognizes the complex nature of ability across physical, intellectual, and social domains (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013). In 2022, 8 million Canadians reported having at least one disability; that represents 27% of the working age population (Statistics Canada, 2023c). There has been some discourse on the appropriateness of "identity-first" versus "person-first" terminology with the former being more often utilized by those with stronger disability identity than the latter which was preferred by those with lower disability identity (Janiszewski et al., 2025). Indigenous groups in Canada, within their 70 or so languages (Statistics Canada, 2023b), do not generally have deficit-based words like "disability" (Rojas-Cárdenas et al., 2025). For the purposes of our study, and in collaboration with the project's advisory committee, the terms "individuals with diverse abilities" or "disabling conditions" were used.

Underrepresented, Unemployed, and Underemployed

Although there is no clear definition of who is "underrepresented," the consensus in Canada includes a wide variety of diverse identities including youth, mature workers, gender minorities, newcomers, social assistance recipients, religious minorities, those with limited work experience, those with a criminal record, those who are homeless, survivors of domestic abuse, and those who have experienced periods of involuntary long-term unemployment (Government of Canada, 2022). To further complicate this definition, many individuals identify with more than one of these groups and can experience multiple barriers related to the intersectionality of these identities. Underrepresented groups are often assumed to be less skilled, making full inclusion difficult and, over time, the cumulative effects of barriers, discrimination, and prejudice create a lasting generational impact (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 2021).

Although the bringing together of diverse perspectives can foster innovation, creativity, and better decision-making (El Ghazali, n.d.), the perceptions of DEI in the workplace have shifted in recent years

(National Public Radio, 2024). Many now see DEI policies and initiatives as giving an unfair advantage to specific groups, rather than levelling the playing field.

Multiculturalism in the workplace remains important for many Canadians. A recent Statistics Canada report highlighted diversity amongst business owners – 20.1% owned by immigrants, 14.4% owned by a visible minority, and 4.5% owned by First Nations, Métis, or Inuit People (Statistics Canada, 2025a). Of those who work, 85% of Canadians reported that they felt their cultural differences were respected, with only 12% indicating they experienced unfair treatment, racism, or discrimination. Nonetheless, both individuals with disabling conditions and those with Indigenous backgrounds have been and continue to be, excluded from many Canadian workplaces.

In 2023, Statistics Canada reported that persons with disabilities were less likely to work full-time than those without a disability (i.e., 77% versus 85%) and for those who did, they earned 16.6% less annually than people without a disability (Statistics Canada, 2023d). The severity and duration of the disabling condition was associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing work-related barriers such as those related to the physical environment, communication, transportation, and technology (Statistics Canada, 2025b).

The employment rate for all classifications of Indigenous individuals was below that of non-Indigenous individuals (74.1%) ranging from 47.1% for Registered Indians on Reserve to 69.1% for Métis (Government of Canada, 2023). A similar pattern occurred when looking at median employment income with all classifications falling below that of non-Indigenous individuals ($47,600) ranging from $29,400 for Registered Indians on Reserve to $45,600 for Métis (Government of Canada, 2023). Top employment barriers noted by Indigenous Canada included culture, driver's license, and literacy/education (Indigenous Canada, n.d.).

Service Delivery

CDPs are at the front lines of a shifting world of work, playing an active role in supporting individuals, workplaces, and communities. As in other industries, professionals in the career development sector are dealing with an increasingly chaotic employment landscape (e.g., reconciling the impacts of colonialism, dealing with economic precarity, responding to the decline in mental health and well-being; So, 2023). In Canada, supporting diverse clients has been embedded in our profession as part of the *Pan-Canadian Competency Framework for Career Development Professionals* (Canadian Career Development Foundations [CCDF], 2021b) and *Career Development Professional Code of Ethics* (CCDF, 2021a). As a result, this formalizes concepts like diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in our practice and in our *National Career Certification* (Nova Scotia Career Development Association, 2025).

Much of the work for CDPs centres around fostering the essential skills individuals need to find and maintain work. The Employment and Social Development Canada's *Skills for Success* framework comprises nine skills foundational for success at work, life, and learning: adaptability, collaboration, communication, creativity and innovation, digital, numeracy, problem solving, reading, and writing (Government of Canada, 2025d). Between 2023 and 2024, there were 87 projects funded to further research the Skills for Success (Government of Canada, 2024a), including those targeted to Indigenous Peoples and individuals with disabling conditions.

A recent study on career services for clients in rural and remote communities highlighted challenges with travelling distances to access services; recruiting staff, clients, and partners; ensuring digital access; and managing service contract challenges in equitable ways suitable to rural realities (Association of Service Providers for Employability and Career Training [ASPECT], 2022). With limited access to additional resources/supports and limited opportunities in the local labour market (e.g., resource- or tourism-based, small- and medium-enterprises), CDPs struggle to meet client needs.

Although service providers have traditionally focused on providing services to individuals struggling with job acquisition and maintenance, the emerging dual-client model carves out space to also support *employers* who are struggling to find and keep good workers. MixtMode and CCDF (2024) outlined helpful insights from the Thriving Workplaces project for designing and delivering community-based programming which attended to both sides of the employment relationship – individuals and employers. Employers, particularly small businesses, lack the resources/capacity to find and keep employees, and are unable to invest

in strategic workforce planning to address the shifting labour market (MixtMode & CCDF, 2024, 2025). The *Thriving Workplaces* project focussed interventions on common "magnetic" factors that both employers and employees deemed important (i.e., meaning and values, workplace culture, inclusion and belonging, working arrangements, skills and competencies, growth, pay and benefits, and external conditions).

The Disconnect

Individuals with diverse needs who live in rural and remote communities are struggling to find and maintain work. Service providers are struggling to effectively support them. Employers report challenges in finding the employees they need to run their organizations and businesses effectively. Funded by the Government of Canada (Government of Canada, 2025b), the *Diversity Disconnect: Job Acquisition and Maintenance Factors for Indigenous Peoples and Individuals with Diverse Abilities* project sought to examine and bridge the disconnect between underrepresented job seekers and employees, workplaces, and employers within rural and remote communities of British Columbia (Free Rein Associates, n.d.).

Our research goals were to:

- Discover how the Skills for Success model can be utilized to bridge the disconnect between employers and underrepresented employees
- Identify ways the Skills for Success model can prepare both employers and underrepresented employees to maintain employment and be productive participants in the labour force
- Identify better ways for employers to support underrepresented employees, such as Indigenous Peoples and persons with diverse abilities, to maintain employment

Method

Five specific communities in southwestern British Columbia were identified as the focus for the study: Agassiz, Ashcroft, Hope, Merritt, and Princeton. Hope, BC is where Free Rein Associates, the primary project partner, is located; the remaining four communities were in reasonable proximity to Hope, yet with unique contexts in terms of industries, access to resources, demographics, cultures, and histories. To maximize relevance of the study for these and other similar communities, the project began by forming an advisory committee to guide the research design, introduce the research team to people within the communities, and help to interpret the research results and implement the final recommendations. We selected and trained local research assistants who themselves were members of underrepresented populations (e.g., person with disabling condition, Indigenous, Immigrant, 2SLGBTQIA, women, youth), and employed a holistic mixed-method approach that provided space for multiple perspectives to be included. Although this research was conducted outside of an academic setting, all researchers followed the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2), with special consideration to Fairness and Equity in Research Participation (Chapter 4; 2022a); Research involving the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada (Chapter 9; 2022b); and Qualitative Research (Chapter 10; 2022c).

Advisory Committee

An advisory committee was formed to ensure a trauma-informed and culturally responsive approach. The committee comprised members of the local First Nations, disability service providers, and other relevant community groups. Committee members received a small honorarium for their time providing feedback, guidance, and support throughout the project.

During the preliminary meeting, the committee provided insights into our environmental scan focused on addressing the complexity of our research participants and ethical considerations to guide the research process. Although the committee saw the relevance of frameworks like the Skills for Success, they emphasized

the need to recognize the impact of pre-employability factors. They cautioned against focusing solely on skill-based training. Instead, they reminded us to look for flexible, creative, and "outside of the box" thinking which aimed to address rigid "corporate" policies and to recognize the practical and logistical challenges and barriers that impeded individuals' ability to demonstrate and/or build skills. In addition, they reinforced the need for person-first language which mirrored preferred language use within the groups we were connecting (e.g., changing from non-traditional vs. underrepresented, persons with disabilities to individuals with disabling conditions, and stigmatized populations to marginalized populations).

During subsequent meetings we elicited feedback on the methodological approach and collection materials (i.e., survey, interview protocol), and reviewed ways the committee could support the data collection phase.

Building a Research Team

The team also hired two project assistants, each with a passion for supporting underrepresented communities and rich lived experience as members of underrepresented groups themselves. Their positionality was an asset to this research, facilitating relationship building with community members and offering culturally unique lenses that informed the research process and data analysis. During the onboarding process, specific training was provided on managing research projects, engaging in ethical research practices (i.e., the TCPS 2), and using culturally appropriate methodologies (e.g., the Enhanced Critical Incident Approach, Butterfield et al., 2005, 2009). Throughout the project, the research coordinator, primary investigator, and project manager provided the assistants with ongoing coaching and mentorship.

Research Approach

As researchers, we were curious about factors contributing to the disconnect that we had noticed between rural employers' needs for staff and the community members who were actively seeking work but not being hired – or, if hired, not keeping their jobs. We wanted to include diverse perspectives (i.e., jobseekers, workers, employers, and community service providers). We also wanted to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, resulting in compelling numerical evidence, where possible, that would be complemented by rich stories in the participants' own words. We, therefore, chose to take a multi-method approach which included a survey and focus groups / interviews.

Survey

The **survey** gathered qualitative and quantitative information from three key groups: (1) job seekers, (2) employees, and (3) employers. A sorting question was used to direct participants to the appropriate series of questions which were phrased slightly differently but elicited equivalent information to make comparisons across groups. The first part included general questions around diversity within the workplace, how supported employees feel to be successful at work, and whether accessibility/cultural needs are addressed. Next, participants rated the importance of the nine Skills for Success in finding and maintaining employment. Lastly, participants ranked a variety of tasks related to their employment journey in terms of how challenging or easy they were.

Surveys were completed online, in-person, or through a condensed mail-in postcard. Due to a low response rate initially, we added the postcard option part-way through the data collection process to encourage additional participation.

Focus Group and Interview Protocol

The structure for conversations with participants followed the ECIT (Butterfield et al., 2005, 2009). Participants were prompted to reflect on critical incidents related to the employment success of underrepresented groups and then asked to identify what had helped to facilitate success, what had hindered

success, and what they wished might have been available to them. All contributions were transcribed and analysed in line with Butterfield et al. (2005, 2009) guidance for the ECIT approach. The process included:

1. Clarify specific terminology/language during the focus group and/or interview with respondent to verify understanding.
2. Review transcript and notes by the interviewer and at least one additional researcher; provide an opportunity for the respondent to review, adjust, and approve.
3. Send finalized transcripts/notes to the full research team for independent categorization.
4. Obtain consensus of independent categorization across the full research for categories reaching a 25% representation threshold in the dataset.
5. Consult with an independent ECIT expert and employment counsellor to ensure accuracy of our methodology/results and obtain advice on next steps.
6. Develop full category descriptions; send to participants for review and approval.
7. Cross-checking of category representation for adequate representation (i.e., 25%) and categories were presented in descending order of frequency.
8. Extracting relevant quotes illustrating categories.

The research team had planned several in-person focus groups as the primary data collection methodology; however, this proved to be particularly challenging in rural/remote communities due to scheduling and such logistical considerations as road closures due to wildfires and small business owners not being able to get coverage to free themselves up to leave their workplaces. To maximize participation, we added the option of one-on-one interviews which were conducted either online or in-person, onsite in the community. Both the focus groups and interviews used the same interview protocol. As with the survey, specific prompts were customized depending on participant type – in this case (1) individual employees and/or job seekers, (2) workplaces, and (3) community representatives.

Participants

Participant recruitment efforts reflected both convenience and snowball sampling methods including cold contacts (e.g., emailing/phoning local businesses, placing advertisements online in local newspapers and on bulletin boards, attending community events, and visiting First Nations community band offices) and warm contacts (e.g., obtaining referrals/introductions from key contacts and advisory committee members, inviting focus group/interview participants to also complete the survey). The team brought small gifts during initial site visits (e.g., custom-made cookies) to support building connections and recognizability of the project. In total, the research team reached out to over 75 service providers, 100 employers, and 450 individual employees or job seekers across the targeted communities, often providing food and refreshments.

To further encourage participation, an incentive was provided within both data collection methods. For the survey, participants were entered into a draw for a Samsung Galaxy Tablet through a prize draw survey that kept identifying information separate from the survey results. Each participant who attended a focus group or one-on-one interview received a $25 gift card, either for a local business or a generic VISA gift card.

Results

Full results and a detailed demographic profile of respondents are available on the project website (Free Rein Associates, n.d.). Responses were included in the data analysis if participants had responded to at least one question; those who only responded to the sorting question were removed. In total, 82 surveys represented the perspectives of job seekers (n=31), employees (n=35), and employers (n=16). Forty-eight participants completed individual interviews (16 individuals, 11 employers, 7 community representatives) or attended a focus group (n= 14, across 3 groups – all individuals).

Survey Findings

For the survey, data from the full version and postcards were amalgamated together. Descriptive data comprised percentages and average score calculations. Missing data were excluded from the analysis.

There was a disconnect in the perceptions of diversity (see Table 1). Only 49% of job seekers strongly agreed or agreed that the workforce/staff of employers within their rural area represented the diversity of the community. However, when employers were asked if their business/organization reflected the diversity in their communities, they had a more favorable assessment (72% agreed or strongly agreed). Responses from current employees were in between the other two groups (63% agreed or strongly agreed).

Table 1

Perceptions of Diversity

Respondent Type	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Job Seeker (n=41)	When I look at employers in my area, the workforce/staff represent the diversity of my community.	7%	20%	24%	44%	5%
Employees (n=49)	When I look around my workplace, it represents the diversity within my community.	8%	15%	14%	51%	12%
Employer (n=25)	When I look around my community, my business/ organization adequately represents its diversity.	0%	16%	12%	56%	16%

When asked about the level of support they received (see Table 2), current employees reported feeling fairly supported within their current workplace (68% either agreed or strongly agreed) and employers reported it was not a struggle to balance the equity, diversity, and inclusion of underrepresented groups with their day-to-day business realities (48% either agreed or strongly agreed). Job seekers, on the other hand, had a less favourable assessment, with only 31% agreeing that employers in their area supported individuals with accessibility or cultural needs.

Respondents reviewed a variety of job acquisition and maintenance tasks. Job seekers and employees were in alignment that *finding job opportunities within [their]community was* difficult. Job seekers rated it the most difficult (n=26) and employers rated it the second most difficult (n=23). Similarly, employers indicated *finding potential applicants within [their] community* was most difficult (n=18). Employers also noted a struggle in *securing necessary supports/accommodations to be successful* (n=11) and *offering advancement opportunities* (n=8).

One notable disconnect was that, although job seekers indicated that feeling welcomed/valued within the existing workplace environment (n=13) was amongst the most difficult, employers rated providing a welcoming space within the existing workplace environment (n=10) as the easiest.

Lastly, on a scale of 1-3 (i.e., 1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = very important), respondents considered how important each of the Skills for Success were to success in finding and maintaining employment. The mean values are presented in Table 3.

It is worth noting that all the Skills for Success scored above 2.00 on the scale of 1-3, indicating that respondents identified each of the skills as at least somewhat important for both finding and maintaining employment. Across all respondent types, *Communication* was ranked as the most important skill for both

Table 2

Level of Support

Respondent Type	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Job Seeker (n=36)	Employers in my area fully support the employment of individuals with specific accessibility or cultural needs	2%	25%	39%	31%	0%
Employees (n=49)	My current employer fully supports the employment of individuals with specific accessibility or cultural needs	6%	8%	18%	37%	31%
Employer (n=25)	I struggle to balance the equity, diversity, and inclusion of underrepresented groups with the realities of day-to-day business*	0%	40%	12%	36%	12%

Note: * reverse-scored item

Table 3

Skills for Finding & Maintaining Employment

Finding Employment	Mean	Maintaining Employment	Mean
Communication	2.93	Communication	2.87
Reading	2.73	Adaptability	2.76
Collaboration	2.71	Collaboration	2.75
Adaptability	2.71	Problem Solving	2.74
Problem Solving	2.70	Reading	2.68
Writing	2.58	Writing	2.62
Digital	2.33	Digital	2.35
Creativity and Innovation	2.31	Creativity and Innovation	2.33
Numeracy	2.25	Numeracy	2.32

finding (job seekers M=2.84; employees M=2.96; employers M=3.00) and maintaining employment (job seekers M=2.85; employees M=2.88; employers M=2.88).

With the assumptions of independence, normality, and homogeneity of variance confirmed, ANOVAs were run across the three groups for each skill. Only *Creativity & Innovation*, revealed a statistical difference between groups for finding employment – i.e., $F(2, 113) = 5.49, < .005$ - indicating that job seekers (M=2.56) were more likely than employees (M=2.23) and employers (M=2.12) to rate Creativity & Innovation higher.

Interviews / Focus Groups

The ECIT analysis revealed 20 categories which comprise factors that helped to facilitate or constrain the employment success of individuals from underrepresented groups. Each of these categories came up in various ways as the interview and focus group data were analysed (the following numbers indicate how many times an item that fit within the category was identified). The categories include: Opportunities (71), Rural Realities (62), Training and Learning (62), Work Environments (62), Fit (60), Awareness (57), Accessibility/ Accommodation (56), Communication (55), Bureaucracy (52), Respect (50), Connections (48), Financial (48), Flexibility (46), Community (44), Motivation (42), Interpersonal Skills (40), Discrimination (36), Collaboration (34), Transportation (28), and Authenticity (28).

Each of these categories comprised both helping and hindering factors. For example, in the absence of *Opportunities* for an individual to gain work experience, that individual's ability to find or keep a job was negatively impacted. On the other hand, individuals benefitted greatly from an employer taking a chance on them despite their limited prior experience; initial employment success led to subsequent successes. One individual shared, "But they [employers] also have to stop and realize there are people out here that can do a job and do it well. If you just give them the opportunity" (I7980). In some cases, underrepresented employees became employers themselves. One employer we spoke to who personally identified as being an individual with a disabling condition, chose to only hire individuals who also have disabling conditions, passing forward the opportunities that had contributed to their own success.

The consensus in the *Rural Realities* category was that approaches imported from urban settings without customization hinder employment success. Both pros and cons were identified in relation to being known by everyone within a small community. For example, one employer shared: "It's a small town. I know everyone so it's, yeah, easy to hire" (W7745). However, others saw challenges associated with limited opportunities and many felt the need to leave their communities to get a good job; others felt they have to just put up with the status quo.

> In a small community, people are afraid to say anything because the supervisor is really well known and has grown up here and you know, and [employees] are afraid of losing their jobs. And so instead of speaking up and trying to correct the problems, people are quitting or they're just putting up with it and are very miserable and unhappy at work. (I7980)

Regarding *Training/Learning*, participants discussed both formal and informal options, including onboarding and ongoing on-the-job training. One participant shared:

> You have good employers who are willing to invest in their people, build the skills internally, and that's great. And that really thrives. But when you don't have that and your employer is expecting you to keep up on skills on your own time and on your own dime, it's really discouraging. (I1278)

Not surprisingly, the lack of formal training available in their rural communities negatively impacted their job opportunities. It is not uncommon that when individuals leave their communities for training, they stay away for work, so the community does not benefit from the skills they have gained. To address this, some communities have arranged to bring in trainers, both for specific in-demand technical skills and also for some of the foundational skills (like driver's training) that impact one's ability to get or keep work. Training within the community is also easier to customize, ensuring that it is culturally appropriate and relevant.

In discussing *Work Environments*, participants compared healthy work environments (e.g., safe, professional, caring, with clear expectations and boundaries) to toxic work environments where they experienced bullying, discrimination, harassment, or unsafe conditions. One individual shared, "It's so much nicer when you can feel like you're part of the company, right? Not just there to do the work" (I3490). A few mentioned that larger employers within rural areas may cite safety considerations as a reason to not hire people from underrepresented groups; although some of these concerns were legitimate, there appeared to be sweeping policies rather than an approach that would assess risk according to the individual's strengths

and needs for accommodation to perform a specific role. This was an example of the types of systemic discrimination that participants had encountered in trying to get and keep good jobs. A community service provider shared the following:

> Yeah, I mean we can provide all the services in the world, but if you don't, if you don't personally feel safe coming into our space like you feel like you might be looked down upon or denigrated or treated poorly because that's all you've experienced, I can't blame you. But hopefully that, by creating that safe space, it's showing you that it's safe. (C5066)

When people felt like they *Fit* within the work environment, they were more likely to enjoy work and stay longer in specific roles or organizations. However, when employees did not seem to fit (either through their own perception or as perceived by colleagues and supervisors), they were more likely to move on – either by choice or by being laid off or fired. One employer noted that, "the match between what Indigenous candidates need and desire is not often a great match between how a public recruitment system operates" (W0259), highlighting the true scope of "fit" across many domains.

Throughout this project, the research team witnessed in person, as well as heard from participants, the impact of lack of *Awareness*. Some employers told us that there were no people with disabilities living in the community, and yet we had just interviewed people with visible disabilities in that same community and interviewed community service providers who supported many people identifying with disabilities who lived there. We also know that disabling conditions may be transient or undiagnosed. One individual shared:

> I have migraines and there's been a few times when I had to call and say, "I'm sorry I can't come in I have a migraine and I'm in bed" and she would say, "Oh, just take a Tylenol and come to work" . . . I finally got diagnosed in 2020 with lupus and I got fired because [my employer] said I wasn't reliable. (I3496)

In addition, one organization reported a failed attempt to establish a committee focussed on diversity, equity, and inclusion because they couldn't find anybody who fit the criterion of belonging to one of the identified equity-seeking groups. On the other hand, when awareness was raised and underrepresented individuals were recognized and better understood, participants reported that this facilitated workplace disclosures so that the need for accommodation could be realistically assessed and addressed, resulting in hiring and supporting the right person for a job rather than hiring to meet a quota.

As mentioned, *Accessibility and Accommodations* are important to many who are struggling to find and keep good jobs. This category is closely related to the previous one though, as without awareness, discussions about what accommodations may be needed are simply unlikely to occur. One individual shared their frustration, "There's a disconnect between our schools, K to 12, where we're celebrated, we're supported. And then they go to the workplace, which is - we don't talk about it. 'What do you mean you have - you need to have an accommodation? I don't know what that means.'" (I0507). A concern often expressed by employers was that accommodations would be either too expensive or logistically impossible to manage. However, interviews with those who required accommodations tended to paint a different picture; often the needed accommodations were intangible – like understanding and flexibility – and others were low cost or could be covered by available funding.

Another category that comprised both helping and hindering factors was *Communication*. As noted previously, this was also the Skill for Success considered most important across all groups responding to the survey. When communication was noted as helpful, it involved active listening without bias or discrimination, valuing input from all, and inviting input and feedback. One individual shared, "You need to be able to hear what people are saying, because not everybody will hear, or say what they really want" (I0109). However, unclear communication (e.g., incomplete or unclear messages) was noted as negatively impacting employment success. A respondent shared, "No one also expects to get every single job they apply for. And without that feedback, how are they supposed to grow?" (W0259), in reference to employers leaving applicants out of the loop on hiring decisions.

Many respondents mentioned the impact of *Bureaucracy* (i.e., the administrative processes in

employment supports and programs and within employers' organizations). In some cases, access to information, programs, guidance, and funding were valuable assets; in others, however, rigid policies, complex application processes or reporting requirements provided barriers to individuals in need of support as well as to employers who may have otherwise been willing to hire and train them. One individual shared their frustration with online systems:

> I feel like I have to click 100 links just to find something and then when I do find something, I'm like okay the requirements are so strict that I would never - I would never qualify for anything like that. (I0172) Another shared, "There's this delicate balance between accountability of government and stewardship of the taxpayers' money and development of systems that are cumbersome . . . There's a line. There's a balance. And I'm not sure we've hit it." (C3212).

Respect also came up as a recurring theme in our research. Employment success was supported when respect was mutual (i.e., individuals respected employers and employers respected their workers). In respectful work environments, individuals reported being treated with dignity, given autonomy, and supported to grow and develop, and employers reported an appreciation for employees who followed the rules, were accountable for their own actions, and responded positively to opportunities that were presented. This was shared by respondents in statements like, "In a small community, that's what people look for, right? They're looking for jobs where they're going to have benefits, where they're going to be well taken care of, and treated respectfully." (I7980). However, in disrespectful environments, pity, abuse, and negative interactions with customers or colleagues kept employment success out of reach. In this category, a general lack of respect for Indigenous culture and knowledge was noted by many respondents as evident in the following contribution:

> Indigenous People are from my perspective and what the government showcases, I think the Indigenous folks are . . . treated negatively and . . . I can't even put the words into my mouth but, for years and years and years and years (I1629).

Another category comprising both helping and hindering factors was *Connections*. Many helpful connections were noted, especially for individuals with a positive reputation within the community and a well-established network. One respondent shared: "It's not what you know, it's who you know." (I0507). However, in rural and remote communities, the opposite can also be the case – it can be very difficult to repair ruptured relationships or damaged reputations, and even the reputations of relatives or friends can impact one's employment success. One respondent shared: "You know what else is hindering? It's . . . favouritism within the communities. I'm sure I'm not the only one who's experienced or even witnessed [it]." (I2651). In this category, as well as the previous one, there was specific mention of the importance of positive connections with the local Indigenous communities – connections which, in many cases, had not been established.

Money matters. The *Financial* category comprised such factors as pay and benefits, cost of living, and funding available for programs and services. Some individuals mentioned how working, especially when being paid a living wage, helped to stabilize their lives. However, others noted that living costs were often higher than they could afford with part-time or precarious jobs, keeping them in an unending cycle of poverty. One respondent shared, "With my paycheck, I can hardly pay the rent and food . . . It's not about being greedy. It's just about being able to survive, survive gracefully." (C9792). Employers also expressed concerns about the costs of accommodations and community service providers called for increased funding for training and to support accommodations for those who needed them.

Another category that emerged as both a helping and hindering factor was *Flexibility*. This included customized and adaptable supports and systems, supporting innovative, strength-based solutions. Rigid systems, on the other hand, negatively impacted employment success. Sometimes just offering a flexible work schedule opened the door to good work for someone who was unable to work long hours or could not predict when a short break might be needed for medical reasons. Other times, the flexibility was needed for Indigenous clients to participate in important community events and family responsibilities. A respondent noted:

> There's times where I'd have to book off at least 4 days or a week just to be where I have to be. There's a lot of death in our families because we consider - family it's just extended and huge. (I8022)

Many respondents also talked about the overall impact of their *Community* on their employment success – both positive and negative. One of the five communities that participated in our research stood out from the rest in terms of accessibility, a welcoming spirit of inclusion, and an intentional (and visible) integration of groups that were typically underrepresented elsewhere, sharing insights like, "It really is a - a town that likes to be very helpful. You know, we've gone through the flood, we've gone through different little disasters and - and people are there to help." (W9292). Participants also mentioned, however, the negative impact of loss of community – for example when they had to relocate from their home communities for access to training, work, or specialized services. One respondent shared: "There used to be a whole lot more of a sense of community that existed in smaller communities, and I don't feel we have that to the same extent anymore, which is unfortunate." (C6510).

Motivation also surfaced as a category mentioned by many. It was clear that the individuals with whom we spoke had a deep desire to contribute to their communities in meaningful ways and facilitate their own ongoing growth and development. They took pride in their work and wanted opportunities to demonstrate their work ethic. Some of the employers who participated in this study also identified as members of underrepresented groups (e.g., some mentioned their own disabilities; others were members of Indigenous communities). These employers drew from their own lived experiences, fueling their motivation to provide opportunities for others who struggled. On the other hand, both individuals and employers identified demotivating factors, such as high turnover after onboarding, economic disincentives to getting off social assistance or disability allowances. One employer shared:

> It just seems that people don't take their job seriously anymore [...] I mean, I grew up in a time where 40 hours was 40 hours, right? That was full time employment and they just – it doesn't seem like people are getting that. They want to work on their terms, not the employers' terms and it's almost a backwards way of thinking to me. (W9860)

There seemed to be some rigid expectations that impacted success (e.g., an unwillingness to consider anything except remote work; inflexibility in providing accommodations). It was interesting that some discussion occurred about too much motivation also being problematic, in that if individuals took on more than they could handle, burnout or another health setback could result.

Participants also identified *Interpersonal Skills* as impacting both finding and keeping employment. Specifically, they mentioned positive traits like accountability, ownership, confidence, and dependability as contributing to employment success. However, they also mentioned the detrimental effects of a poor attitude, including being apathetic; they also mentioned fearfulness as a hindering factor. One respondent shared, "They don't have the social skills, they don't have the, I don't know, the essential skills to be able to get up and go to work and maintain those jobs." (C6456). Of course, interpersonal skills involve interactions with others; respondents noted that power dynamics and, also, how people relate to each other can both help and hinder employment success.

It is perhaps not surprising that in research involving underrepresented populations, Discrimination surfaced as a theme. Participants provided examples of racism, stereotypes, and the ongoing impact of colonialism. One shared:

> Just because we have a disability, it doesn't mean that we have to be treated differently. We're still the same . . . I know some employers, if they find that you have a disability, they treat you differently than, say, like a worker that doesn't have a disability. (I3496).

In several cases, the discrimination perpetuated beliefs about the limited value that members of Indigenous communities or people living with disabilities had to offer to the workplace; in others, the discrimination was directed towards customers or clients who were members of the same groups that the

employee identified with, leaving the employee feeling disrespected or not trusted, even though the comment was directed at someone else. It was interesting that many employers and community service providers expressed confidence that there was no discrimination within their setting. For example, one shared, "When people are hired, they come to work in an inclusive environment - you know, free of bias and prejudice and that - you know it's a welcoming place where people want to come to work." (W2280). This, however, contrasted with the many examples shared by others within those same communities.

The impact of *Collaboration* was mentioned by many. This ranged in scope, from walking alongside individuals to support them to bringing together several organizations within a community in more formal partnership agreements. As a hindering factor, lack of collaboration resulted in isolation, and redundant services or gaps. One participant noted, "I've been able to have numerous interactions, develop partnerships you know with different communities. And yeah it's been beneficial. (W2280).

Transportation was an interesting category, in that it was the only one mentioned by individuals and community service providers but not by employers, revealing an apparent, but significant, disconnect. In rural and remote communities, access to safe, reliable, and affordable transportation is a lifeline, providing access to work, healthcare, education, financial independence, and community engagement. One respondent reported:

> We lack a transportation system. So, people without driver's licenses . . . this is poverty, this is disconnection from family . . . we see young people that are unable to, they want to get their driver's license, but they don't have anybody that will teach them. And we don't have a driving school here and to bring a driving school in here gets quite expensive. (C3212)

The final category that emerged was *Authenticity* – essentially, the opportunity to be genuine and to bring one's full identity to work, school, and community activities. One respondent said, "It's - it's really about holding that space, truth, and vulnerability, and all of those pieces to be your whole self." (I0507). In contexts where people do not feel safe to be authentic, individuals may not disclose important information about the accommodations necessary for disabling conditions or cultural responsibilities, and organizations may misrepresent opportunities or services in job ads or other communication. Being authentic occurs in a context where it is safe to show our humanity. In the words of one participant, "The difference, I think, between a good employer and a bad is one who sees the human in you" (I1278).

Authenticity was described as genuine, honest, and open communication, collaboration, and connections across respondent groups. Where present, authenticity enabled stakeholders to represent themselves and their intentions with clarity and truth. It was helpful to support individuals to feel safe to disclose conditions and request the accommodations they need, trusting they'd be heard. Lack of authenticity hindered employment success resulting in individuals hiding/masking conditions and in workplaces/communities misrepresenting hiring requirements and processes.

It is worth noting that each of the categories was represented across all respondent types with the exception of Transportation. Although individuals and community representatives acknowledged the impact of having (or lacking) accessible, safe, and reliable transportation, employers didn't identify transportation as either a helping or hindering factor.

Discussion

Analyzing the research results led to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the disconnect that had originally inspired this study. As the 20 categories of helping and hindering factors clearly indicate, there is no "one size fits all" solution. Applying a systems lens (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to the data analysis helps to reveal how *interconnected* the issues are that have, ironically, led to the *disconnect* between diverse, underrepresented job seekers and the rural employers who desperately need good workers.

Although employers genuinely thought their workplaces represented the diversity of their communities, job seekers and employees were more critical. This, in part, may be related to "colour blindness" (i.e., the tendency born from embracing diversity to see all people as equal). However, this lack of awareness of

difference is dangerous in that it negates the very real barriers that underrepresented groups regularly face. Also, diversity (e.g., disabling conditions, Indigenous) is not always apparent, especially in rural communities where underrepresented groups may have limited access or not feel included (e.g., "out of sight, out of mind"). For these reasons, the fear of judgement and discrimination hold many underrepresented individuals back from living authentically and openly. As the research team began disseminating results, specifically on social media, we were met with some negative, and even hateful comments. These comments reflected the very bias/stereotypes that the research was aiming to overcome and reinforced the need to consider the report's recommendations within the shifting landscape of DEI practices.

Employers are focused on building their businesses; however, they struggle to find and keep employees. Many employers lack an awareness of, and/or desire or resources to, support employees with complex employment challenges. They generally believed that creating welcoming/safe spaces was an easy task, but job seekers struggled to find such spaces in their communities. Without open communication, one of the Skills for Success, individuals, workplaces, and communities will continue to struggle to find common ground. Communities looking for solutions are often left overwhelmed by bureaucracy and disappointed by the lack of flexibility to meet their community's specific needs.

Recommendations

Get Real

A holistic, system-based exploration of the experiences of different groups is necessary to foster a shared understanding of lived experiences in the context of rural realities. This requires an increased awareness of another's perspective and a willingness to challenge disconnects, biases, and assumptions. Unfortunately, many individuals, employers, and communities are in information echo chambers that reinforce polarization through social media algorithms (Chueca Del Cerro, 2024). Anti-DEI policies seem to have gained momentum in this polarized state, along with a focus on merit-based hiring. Such a backlash ignores systemic barriers, interpreting success or failure as inherently tied to only individual qualities (Mogilski et al., 2025). Further examination and open, unbiased debate seem to be needed now more than ever to help bridge the diversity disconnect.

Our respondents emphasized how the job opportunity itself was insufficient. If the work environment is unsafe, unaccommodating, or toxic due to a manager's disposition or the organization's inflexibility, no amount of training focussed on upskilling the individual will fix that issue. We heard employers offer sentiments that echo the popular phrase "no one wants to work anymore," indicating that it was a struggle to find qualified, motivated candidates within their rural communities. However, individual job seekers shared similar struggles finding suitable, decent employment opportunities; many were desperate to just get a chance to prove themselves. Community representatives were confident they had clients that could make meaningful, valuable contributions within local workplaces with just a few accommodations, but employers were reluctant to engage with the burden of reporting and oversight protocols in order to qualify for wage subsidies or on-the-job training supports. Employers thought it was easy to provide a welcoming space, but job seekers were more critical – they thought it was difficult to feel welcome/valued within the workplace.

Even if a position is a great fit, if the individual could not access reliable transportation, they simply would not be successful if they could not consistently get to work. We saw this clearly in our research related to transportation – employers didn't report transportation as a factor contributing to employment success; individuals and community representatives spoke at length about the challenges of public transportation in terms of availability, accessibility, and safety. To their credit, as we shared these research results in various settings and formats, the employers we spoke with could see the importance of access to transportation. This is a tangible example of the blind spots we all hold; in the Four Stages of Competence model (Meyer, 2025), we begin in *unconscious incompetence* (i.e., we don't know what we don't know); this reinforces the need for ongoing training and discussion related to all aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The first recommendation coming from this research, therefore, is to *Get Real* - about the barriers to employment success situated within individuals and also those within the interconnected systems that

surround them. We can't address these barriers if we disagree on what they are or even whether or not they exist. As such, the following Skills for Success are essential for all involved: Collaboration, Communication, Problem Solving, and Reading.

Make it Personal

Throughout the interviews, focus groups, research team meetings, and post-project discussions, each member of the research team engaged in deep reflection about our own roles in the disconnects, as well as the roles of employers, policy makers, and the career development professionals (CDPs) who work tirelessly to support their diverse clients to achieve employment success. We recognized that even if service providers collectively represent diversity in lived experiences and backgrounds, all are still influenced by a colonial system. As such, CDPs may be viewed as the gatekeepers to training and/or employment. This is a power differential that can be difficult to overcome amidst a history of mistrust or either a perceived or real lack of understanding of rural realities.

Within the context of the current study, most CDPs' work is subject to the oversight and funding of the Government of Canada either directly or through the Labour Market Transfer Agreements (LMTAs). Many perceive a push to get people back to work quickly, resulting in limited time to support diverse individuals who have complex needs in order to become successfully and sustainably employed. Our respondents (i.e., individuals, employers, and service providers) shared their frustrations with bureaucratic systems that seemed, at times, to put up more barriers than supports. For example, some individuals with disabling conditions felt penalized by systems withholding their benefits if they worked too many hours during a single pay period, even though they were trying to help their employer by being a "good" employee.

Although CDPs may not be able to make widespread systemic change, at least not immediately, they do have the power to make small, meaningful changes that can impact their communities. Our second recommendation, therefore, is to *Make it Personal*. We invite CDPs, employers, and community leaders to examine some of the root causes of the diversity disconnect, and to identify a starting point that is within your own sphere of influence and capacity to address. Relationship building is a critical part of this process; it is through open discussion about diverse perspectives that systemic barriers and misconceptions will be revealed and can be addressed. Relevant Skills for Success include Adaptability, Creativity and Innovation, and Problem Solving.

Stay Diligent

Despite a realistic understanding of the diversity disconnect and a personal commitment to making things better, there is also a need to constantly monitor and evaluate the impact of any change efforts. This is in part to assess progress and ensure changes have had the intended impact; it is also in part to attend to the inherently chaotic environments within which all systems exist. Inviting ongoing feedback from multiple perspectives (e.g., jobseekers, employees, employers, community leaders, CDPs) will help to continue to bridge the diversity connect within rural communities. Discover and document what's working, what's not, and what do folks wish they had access to for support? Ongoing check-ins will also surface the unanticipated and unintentional consequences of changes; within complex ever-changing systems, changes to one part inevitably have consequences elsewhere. For that reason, our third recommendation is to *Stay Diligent*, activating the following Skills for Success: Adaptability, Communication, Creativity and Innovation, Digital, Numeracy, Problem Solving, and Reading.

Work Together

Ongoing consultation and developing synergistic partnerships are particularly important in rural and remote communities where limited resources impact any individual organization's ability to address complex needs and challenges. Solutions and services that are appropriate for densely populated urban settings may not

seamlessly port over to rural contexts; partnerships may help to stretch funding through sharing space, staff, and specialized skills and equipment.

Project-based funding models for many community services and resources also impact sustainability. There are numerous examples of one organization losing project funding to another competitor, who then starts from scratch in setting up space, purchasing furniture and supplies, hiring new staff, and creating an online presence. Aside from such tangible components, there is an accompanying loss of knowledge – of key contacts in the local community, the needs of specific clients, and the historical reasons for why things have been done the way they are. It also takes time to build new relationships – with clients and with community members.

For all these reasons, our fourth recommendation is to Work Together. Through informal collaboration and more formal partnerships, smaller organizations with niche services can contribute to larger projects to meet identified priority needs for the community. They'll need the following Skills for Success: Collaboration, Creativity and Innovation, Problem Solving, and Reading.

Get Loud

Our research revealed 20 categories impacting the employment success of diverse individuals, and each of those categories comprised factors that both helped and hindered their chances to succeed. The participants (job seekers, community service providers, employees, and employers) who so generously shared their stories with us expressed gratitude that someone was finally taking the time to listen to them. In every community, there are similar stories to be shared. We encourage CDPs to share their own stories of success and challenges as they advocate for change, documenting and disseminating information that extends beyond what's mandatory to collect. There are many examples of the stories from the *Diversity Disconnect* research project in the full report (Free Rein Associates, n.d.) and at https://diversityatwork.ca. As researchers, we feel a responsibility to handle these stories with respect - the same respect that research participants were seeking in their employment journeys.

With an ethical, trauma-informed approach, and the willingness to engage in deep listening, CDPs can provide space for their clients to share their own stories. For that reason, our final recommendation is to *Get Loud*. Your advocacy role can be to amplify their message, not tell the story for them, employing the following Skills for Success: Communication, Creativity & Innovation, Digital, and Writing.

Limitations

An obvious limitation to this study is also its strength – it was situated within very small rural communities, each with unique contexts, and it focussed primarily on the needs of specific groups of people (i.e., Indigenous Peoples and individuals with disabling conditions) to get and keep good jobs within those communities. The qualitative components of the research are not intended to be generalizable, and the quantitative components represent a very specific context. However, the results have resonated with individuals living in other rural communities, far beyond Canada, and with individuals living with disabilities, even in urban centres in Southeast Asia. This suggests that further research, either replicating this study in different communities or with different underrepresented groups or extending the study by focussing more deeply on any of the 20 categories that were identified would help to build a bigger bridge to address the diversity disconnect that is so prevalent and persistent across contexts and cultures.

Conclusion

Bringing together diverse voices, perspectives, and ways of understanding the employment landscape will inevitably bring conflict. Each individual draws conclusions, makes decisions, and prioritizes needs through the filter of lived experiences and values that inform meaning-making – meaning that is inherently tied to cultural dimensions and influential systems. However, there is common ground to be found. This research identified 20 specific categories that can either help or hinder the employment success of diverse

individuals within rural and remote communities. With the exception of Transportation, each of those categories were mentioned by each group of participants in the study (i.e., jobseekers, employees, employers, and community service providers). There was wide recognition of limited resources within many of the small businesses and not-for-profit organizations that employ people within rural and remote communities. For the most part, the changes people were asking for did not have high or unreasonable price tags attached. Many, in fact, simply involved a willingness to acknowledge the diversity disconnect – and to deal with it. Our findings confirmed that within rural communities, there are many individuals willing and able to work, in some cases with a need for minor accommodations, and there were employers desperately seeking good workers. The disconnect often involved misperceptions, misunderstanding, and/or miscommunication. The Skill for Success prioritized by all participant groups was Communication; clearly a key to bridging the disconnect is to talk – and to listen. Just as individuals had stories to tell, so did employers and community service providers. Providing ongoing opportunities to share needs and to work together to resolve them for the benefit of all in the community will help to build sustainable solutions.

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