



Study of Causes and Impacts of Harassment and Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Public Service

Executive summary

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Harassment and discrimination have been identified as workplace challenges in Canada's federal public service. Results from the Public Service Employee Survey provide evidence that the public service has challenges in welcoming and including members of equity-seeking groups and that rates of harassment and discrimination remain high for persons with disabilities. Past studies such as the [2019 Benchmarking Study of Workplace Accommodations](#) and the [Joint Union/Management Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion](#) report that harassment and discrimination are identified as barriers by persons with disabilities.

The Office of Public Service Accessibility (OPSA) contracted Phoenix Strategic Perspectives (Phoenix SPI) to conduct qualitative public opinion research to explore more deeply the perspectives and work life experience of persons with disabilities in the federal public service vis-à-vis harassment and discrimination. The main objective was to gain a better understanding of the causes and impacts of harassment and discrimination for employees with disabilities. The findings are intended to help inform recommendations to address the causes and impacts of harassment and discrimination in the workplace and ensure a healthy and respectful work environment for all.

This research included 53 in-depth interviews conducted with employees of the core public administration who identify as a person with a disability who believed they personally experienced harassment or discrimination in the last three years (that is, September 2020 through January 2023). Interviews were conducted by tele- and video-conferencing systems between November 6, 2022, and January 11, 2023.

Participants were recruited using an online screening questionnaire made available through a link in email announcements distributed by OPSA through the Persons with Disabilities Champions and Chairs Committee (PwDCCC). The PwDCCC supports public service employment equity objectives by serving as a forum for networking and sharing of employment equity best practices among departments and agencies. The PwDCCC includes more than 110 Champions for Persons with Disabilities and Employee Network Chairs from departments and agencies across the public service and is chaired by a Deputy Minister Champion for Federal Employees with Disabilities.

This public opinion research was qualitative (not quantitative). Qualitative research is designed to reveal a rich range of opinions and generate directional insights. The findings are not (nor were they intended to be) projectable to the full population of employees of the core public administration who identify as a person with a disability who has experienced harassment or discrimination in the last three years.

Presented below is a summary of key findings that participants described based on their personal experiences:

Incidents of harassment and discrimination tend to arise from a request for accommodations

- Participants usually experienced incidents of harassment in the context of requested accommodations. This most often involved the attitude of superiors, and occasionally the attitudes of co-workers, regarding accommodations. Incidents of harassment also occurred routinely in the context of team meetings, work performance and productivity, formal performance evaluations, and career advancement.
- Participants experienced incidents of discrimination most often when they had difficulties obtaining workplace accommodations. Difficulties related to the following: the level of effort required to support requested accommodations; delays in getting the accommodations; refusals of requests for accommodations; insufficient accommodations; limited or no assistance installing workplace accommodations; and removal of existing accommodations.

Incidents of harassment and discrimination took a variety of forms

- Examples of harassment that participants experienced included micro-management; being given work-related tasks that are unreasonable or impossible; exclusion; refusal to take complaints about harassment seriously; public humiliation (for example, use of derogatory terms to refer to someone based on their health condition or disability); offensive remarks (for example, being described as a “problem” or “not like everyone else”).
- Typical examples of discrimination that participants experienced included the duty to accommodate not being respected or fulfilled at all or in a timely manner; excessive burden of proof required to justify requested accommodations; expressions of disbelief regarding someone’s disability and requested accommodations; and the impediment of career advancement.

Both formal and informal actions were taken in response to harassment and discrimination

- Most participants took some form of action in response to the harassment or discrimination they experienced. These actions were both formal and informal, with formal action often following unsuccessful informal action.
- Informal actions most often included bringing the issue directly to the attention of superiors, speaking with colleagues on how to handle the issue, documenting the incidents, and proactively informing colleagues of one’s disability or health condition.
- Formal action most often took the following forms: contacting an Informal Conflict Management System (ICMS), a union, an ombudsperson, human resources, the Employment Assistance Program (EAP), or filing a formal complaint.

Lack of knowledge viewed as root cause of harassment and discrimination

- In trying to explain what is at the root of their personal experiences of harassment and discrimination, participants most often pointed to lack of knowledge about disabilities and persons with disabilities. This included lack of knowledge and awareness about the types of challenges faced by persons with disabilities or about the nature and impact of various disabilities, as well as assumptions or prejudices about what is and is not a disability, and about what persons with disabilities can accomplish in the workplace.

Participants' impressions of their work environment have been negatively affected by harassment and discrimination

- Most participants said their overall impression of their work environment was negatively affected, at least to some extent, by their experience of harassment or discrimination, and many indicated that it was significantly affected by this experience.
- Terms consistently used by participants to describe their feelings about their work environment included "cynical," "dissatisfied," "disillusioned," "disengaged," "disappointed," "demoralized," and "frustrated."

Most participants said their experience has had a negative impact on their day-to-day work, their career, and their private life

- Examples of ways in which participants' personal experiences of harassment and discrimination negatively affected their day-to-day work included the following: lower productivity at the workplace; difficulty focussing on work; less interest in doing work well; disengagement from colleagues; greater distrust of management; and an increased use of sick days.
- Examples of ways in which participants' personal experiences have negatively affected their career progression and prospects within the federal public service included the following: receiving negative performance evaluations; acquiring a reputation as a problem employee; not being given the training needed to advance or leadership development opportunities; inability to use a manager as a reference or a manager being unwilling to provide a reference; and apprehensiveness about applying for advancement due to uncertainty regarding their accommodations.
- Examples of ways participants' private lives have been affected included the following: sleep deprivation, increased stress and depression, which often resulted in individuals seeking medical assistance or counselling services; and difficulties with personal relationships.

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Participants collectively identified a variety of things they think need to be in place to address the causes and reduce the incidence of harassment and discrimination in the workplace towards federal public servants with a disability or health condition

- The most frequently identified measure was mandatory training and/or education for managers. This included training and education with an emphasis on the following: the duty to accommodate, including appropriate and inappropriate language and behaviour regarding requests for accommodations; mediation and conflict resolution; performance appraisals, and how to provide constructive feedback; diversity and inclusion to increase awareness and knowledge; better understanding of disabilities, particularly non-apparent disabilities and conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); and understanding the warning signs of harassment.

The contract value was \$95,810.55 (HST included).