

# Federal Public Servants with Disabilities: Follow Up Survey on Workplace Accommodations

## October 2019 Follow-Up Survey Executive Summary

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## Executive summary

### Background and objectives

The Office of Public Service Accessibility (OPSA), Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS), was created in 2018 to assist departments in preparing for new accessibility requirements under the *Accessible Canada Act* and to develop a public service accessibility strategy to improve accessibility government-wide. Because minimal information existed regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of current workplace accommodation practices, OPSA conducted a Benchmarking Study on Workplace Accommodation Practices in the Federal Public Service, beginning with an online survey conducted in May 2019 to gather factual data from employees and supervisors.

The findings of that research ([Baseline Analysis of the May 2019 Survey on Workplace Accommodations in the Federal Public Service](#))<sup>1</sup> led to the next phase of the Benchmarking Study: development of in-depth follow-up Public Opinion Research (POR) online surveys, with the objective of obtaining a deeper understanding of the experience of users (employees and supervisors) with existing workplace accommodation practices. This research will be used to guide improvements to the process of obtaining workplace accommodations to enable employees with disabilities to contribute to their full potential. This report summarizes the feedback received from employees and supervisors in response to the follow-up (POR) online surveys. Because the survey was anonymous, however, it is important to note that there is no direct correlation between the individual responses of employees and supervisors.

### Methodology

Environics designed two survey instruments, one for employees who requested an accommodation for themselves in the last three years, and one for supervisors who requested an accommodation for an employee in the last three years. OPSA conducted the online surveys with members of the federal public service between October 22 and 29, 2019. A total of **980** valid surveys were completed: **802** by employees and **178** by supervisors.

There are two important considerations to keep in mind:

- These are non-probability samples of employees and supervisors who participated in the May 2019 survey and asked to be re-contacted for follow-up consultation. As a result, this sample cannot be considered representative of all federal public service employees and supervisors who have experience with workplace accommodations.
- Both surveys employed quantitative, closed-ended questions (presented here in specific proportions and figures), and qualitative, open-ended questions in which respondents could provide any response they wished (where themes and patterns are presented instead of proportions and figures).

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<sup>1</sup> *Baseline Analysis of the May 2019 Survey on Workplace Accommodations in the Federal Public Service*. URL: <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/accessibility-public-service/baseline-analysis-2019-survey-workplace-accommodations-federal-public-service.html>

## Contract value

The contract value was \$74,836.62 (HST included).

## Key findings and observations

The main purpose of these surveys was to deepen the understanding of how federal employees and supervisors view and experience the workplace accommodation request process. This summary presents the key findings about each phase of the process, followed by additional observations specific to the employee and supervisor surveys.

### 1. The accommodation request process

#### Pre-request phase

- Employees consistently associate negative emotions with the period prior to submitting their accommodation request, the most common being fear about how the request will be perceived by supervisors and colleagues. These negative emotions have implications for whether, and when, employees choose to make an accommodation request. Often employees delay their request until they reach a “tipping point” where they can no longer cope, which can have negative health consequences.
- To make their decision to request an accommodation easier, employees want their colleagues to believe and trust they are seeking an accommodation to overcome barriers in the workplace so they can contribute to their fullest potential, and not due to laziness, lack of ability or desire for preferential treatment. Another barrier for employees is a lack of clarity about the process and how to initiate it.
- Supervisors also acknowledge challenges associated with having conversations with employees about workplace accommodations, as well as with the complexity of the process, both of which are compounded by insufficient training and support.

#### Assessment phase

- In the assessment phase, the vast majority (nine in ten) employees were required to provide evidence supporting their need for accommodation. A key challenge for the medical certificate request process is the lack of clarity regarding the information requirements, which often leads to multiple physician visits to acquire the acceptable information. Employee concerns about the formal assessment process include that it is too slow and does not align with the circumstances of the request (for example, the fitness-to-work assessment includes very little about mental health). In both cases, there are concerns about managers who disregard the results.
- For supervisors, a key challenge is that the medical and assessment forms do not generate the intended information about functional limitations necessary to make the decision for or against an accommodation.
- Ultimately, employees feel that a process that requires them to gather medical certificates and/or other evidence signals a lack of trust and support; unless there is a strong, objective reason to question the

validity of the request, it should be approved by default. Many supervisors echo this sentiment, especially when it comes to accommodations resulting from an ergonomic assessment.

### Decision and outcome phase

- Among accommodation requests where the outcome is known, nine in ten are approved and one in ten are denied (excluding cases where the outcome is not known).
- Of approved requests, less than two thirds (64%) are fully in place to date. For employees, the length of time to receive an accommodation is a major issue that can worsen their condition and constrain their ability to contribute fully. This is compounded by delays at every phase of the process, including the length of time to obtain evidence (assessment phase), receive a decision, implement the accommodation, and procure and install necessary equipment. Supervisors also identify the cumbersome nature of the procurement process as a pain point, and the need for a centralized approach to reduce delays.
- While the proportion of accommodation requests in this survey that have been denied is relatively low, it is twice as likely among those with mental health disabilities (21%). Among employees whose request was denied, few say they received enough information to understand the decision; in turn, many feel that negative management perceptions of their condition or disability played a role in the decision. These employees are forced to make a choice about whether to leave their position (or the public service altogether) or continue without accommodation. Supervisors involved in a denied request typically say the reasons are a lack of proof of medical necessity for an accommodation or an inability to provide the accommodation within operational limitations.

### Overall accommodation process

- Employees who chose to complete this survey express widespread dissatisfaction (58%) with the accommodation process as a whole. Both employees and supervisors responding to the survey find the process complex and challenging to navigate, and would like a simpler, more centralized process led by neutral functional experts. Employees also identify the need for an advocate to help navigate the process and act on their behalf with unsupportive or adversarial managers.
- Another significant barrier is the need for employees to make multiple requests or repeatedly submit medical certificates and/or other evidence for the same accommodation due to a change in their position, physical office or supervisor. Employees and supervisors support the proposed “accommodation passport” program, which would allow the transfer of an approved accommodation to other departments or positions.

## 2. Additional findings from the employee survey

- More than half (54%) of employee requests in this survey involved at least one piece of adaptive technology, and four in ten requested more than one as part of their request.
- Employees' views about their future in the Government of Canada are connected to their experience with the accommodation process. Career optimism is notably higher among employees with an accommodation fully in place.
- Recent experiences of harassment and discrimination reported by employees who chose to complete this survey are higher than the incidence rate reported in the 2019 Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) by people with disabilities in general. In this survey, harassment and discrimination are more widely reported by those required to provide medical or other evidence and by those whose request was denied, suggesting a possible compounding effect (not necessarily cause and effect). This survey's results may support the thesis that the higher harassment and discrimination scores reported in the PSES are linked to workplace accommodations.
- Four in ten employees report taking extended sick leave at some point in their career as a result of not being appropriately accommodated. This is particularly common for those facing workplace barriers due to mental health conditions. Almost a quarter (23%) of these employees remain on sick leave for more than six months, and satisfaction with the level of support upon their return is very low (16%).
- There is some evidence that employees with conditions or disabilities that are more readily recognizable to outside observers, such as seeing, hearing and mobility disabilities, tend to have more successful accommodation experiences. Moreover, more than half of supervisors agree that "invisible" conditions make the assessment process more complex.
- Few significant gender-based differences were identified in the research. However, women are somewhat more likely than men to say that chronic pain and sensory or environmental disabilities are the reason for their accommodation request and to describe their condition as episodic or recurring. Possibly as a result, women are more likely to be required to provide a medical certificate or other evidence, to have taken extended sick leave at some point as a result of not being appropriately accommodated, and to have chosen not to request an accommodation in the past.

### 3. Additional findings from the supervisor survey

- Most supervisors feel that they do not have adequate resources to effectively manage accommodation requests, and that the amount of time and effort dedicated to this process is not fully appreciated by senior management. Notably, supervisors often cite the need for more expert advice on workplace accommodations, other than reliance on doctors and specialists. An opportunity may exist to clarify the most effective and helpful source of expertise to support managers in managing requests for accommodations.
- The single most common source of funding for accommodation requests is the budgets of working-level managers. Supervisors have no clear preference regarding the source of funds for accommodation requests. Beyond the source of funding, it is generally recognized that there is a need for better support through the process and greater clarity regarding the process.
- Beyond the funding of accommodations, supervisor suggestions for additional resources or support include a more consistent or centralized accommodation process, step-by-step instructions, and greater access to information and functional experts.
- There is also no consensus on whether the existing performance evaluation system is appropriate for employees for disabilities, but suggestions for improvement include aligning performance objectives with approved accommodations, re-evaluating assessment criteria and assessing performance once the accommodation is in place, and ensuring that evaluators know about previously documented accommodations.

### Political neutrality statement and contact information

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